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A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *December 1985*

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Escapees in paradise: literary life in San Francisco

by Stephen Schwartz

The San Francisco Bay Area has long enjoyed a reputation for experimental behavior on the part of its intellectuals—a confusion of art and life, if you will. But unlike Paris, Berlin, and Leningrad in the Twenties, or New York in the Forties, San Francisco has been much less a laboratory of the avant-garde than a cheering section. No significant intellectual movement has begun here; the "Beat" excitement of the Fifties proved in large part barren, having produced writers who were, in the end, undistinguished when not downright banal. Even the stars of the Beats—Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg—can now be seen to have owed most of their output to the New York environment from which they sprang. The sad truth seems to be that the only achievement to be properly claimed by a tradition of "San Francisco writers"—as opposed to writers who happen to live in San Francisco—is the ostentatious exhibition of new clichés.

I love San Francisco. It has been my home for nearly all my life. But it must be said that San Francisco has never been much more than a backwater intellectually. Ideas or fashions arrive late, bedraggled, emaciated, stunted. They are then transformed into the cynosures of enthusiasts, who flourish the faded and tattered banners of distant revolutions with an extreme and ugly fervor. Never were the Surrealists of Paris so fanatical, intolerant, and violent as their San Francisco imitators a half century later; never were the Marxist intellectuals of Berlin, or even of Moscow, more bigoted, rigid, and Jesuitical.

Many San Francisco intellectuals are not actually intellectuals at all, but escapees of one sort or another. Not from jail or mental treatment, but from the harsh realities of life on the East Coast—from marriage, debts, snow, or the shame of failure in the New York literary world. In San Francisco, there is no failure; all is permitted, if not encouraged. When a conversation comes to the question "What do you do?" and you answer "I am a writer," there is no progress to the logical next step: "What have you published?" It is as if the interlocutor knows too well the dangers of that particular swamp. A similar silence normally surrounds the subject of what one reads. Most of the local inhabitants read little or nothing of significance.

There is, then, no avant-garde in San Francisco worthy of the title. Is there even something that can be called an intelligentsia? We have a tired clique of old Beats and their squalid groupies, picking over their own detritus. Among the young, there are cults: the followers of neo-Surrealism and "language poetry," and various kinds of mostly unserious Marxists. Indeed, a kind of leftist miasma covers the entire literary terrain; it seems to be taken for granted that to be involved with letters is to be on the Left. Of course, there are the prophets of Blackness, Hispanicness, womanness, and homosexualness, but none of them makes a

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serious attempt to associate himself with something intrinsically new. The literary products of such movements are mostly composed of enervating repetition: of street-talk reminiscences, Latin American historical revisionism, expressions of cloying man-hatred, or memories of bath-house sex—as if each recounting redeemed, rather than emphasized, the nullity of the matters addressed.

The Beats deserve nothing other than burial, with a minimum of public grief. Their "aging caudillo"—as one used to hear General Franco described—is Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose publishing house, City Lights, has seemed to establish as its standard: "When you cannot, after much effort, find something bad to publish, then you might as well publish something good." Few people ever took Ferlinghetti seriously as a poet or translator. His horizons as a poet ended with his recycling the justifiably forgotten verse forms of Kenneth Fearing; as a translator, he has managed to bring out only English versions of Jacques Prévert, the ex-Surrealist turned nightclubbish clown. By his own admission Ferlinghetti refused to publish some erotic works of Guillaume Apollinaire because he feared the censorious reaction of feminists, who might object to Apollinaire's humorously explicit use of anatomical language; and he has turned down projects to translate other important foreign writers (for example, Raymond Roussel, André Breton, Julien Gracq, and Lacenaire) because they are not yet sufficiently known in the United States.

Like Prévert, Ferlinghetti always preferred clowning to writing. Typically, he won his earliest distinction as a practitioner of "jazz poetry" at reading sessions in San Francisco dives. But clowning offends nobody and involves no risks; it is the San Francisco literary mode par excellence. Today nearly all the poetry readings in the city are dominated by displays of rhetoric influenced far less by any of the recognized poets in the English language than by Lenny Bruce and Bob Dylan.

Ferlinghetti hovers over the city's literary affairs like a ghost—Scrooge's rather than Marley's. The man seems to have exhausted any capacity he might have once had for generosity or magnanimity toward younger writers. He now dedicates himself to the defense of Stalinist censorship in Nicaragua, using arguments that can only be described as ingenuous. Ingenuous is, indeed, the description applied to him by the Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra, and supported by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, once Ferlinghetti's mentor and friend. Does Ferlinghetti care that his current stance on censorship clashes so starkly with his libertarian antics in the late Fifties, during the obscenity trail of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*? He seems not to. Nor does anybody else, here in paradise.

The conformist leftism that makes the pro-censorship declamations of Ferlinghetti acceptable has set a peculiar tone for the city's literary life. In many poetry bookstores anyone who is not a devotee of Lenin feels uneasy. It is more than a matter of the absurdly limited (politically "correct") selection of books. There is almost an air of physical intimidation. One quails at the thought of what might happen should one enter one of these places and ask for a title by William F. Buckley. In a sense they are not so much bookstores as shrines guarded by initiates.

In San Francisco, cultishness and sectarianism are the order of the day. The most prevalent of the literary cults is that of the "mysterious foreigner," usually a leftist extolled as the greatest writer of all time. There is a cult of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, for example, the purveyor of illimitable mawkishness who was incidentally an agent of the Soviet secret police; after committing a number of crimes during the Spanish Civil War, he went to Mexico to serve in the conspiracy to murder Trotsky, for which he was expelled from the Chilean diplomatic service. Needless to say, Neruda's gringo acolytes are largely innocent of any real knowledge of the Spanish language. Similarly, the many worshipers at the shrine of the Russian writer Viktor Shklovsky—who

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survived by accommodating Stalin—usually know nothing of the Russian language. There is also, sadly, a cult of Breton. Because his admirers cannot read French they have not yet learned that the theoretician of Surrealism, far from staying faithful to his youthful Trotskyism, became a kind of neoconservative *avant la lettre* after 1945.

Naturally, as befits a populace that spawns chiliastic factions, San Francisco also possesses a stratum of literary functionaries—individuals who, without distinction in the craft of writing, have gained a bureaucratic sinecure by working their way through the "Poetry in the Schools" program and similar make-work projects. These types generally comport themselves like Soviet commissars; most of them have no idea what a poem might be, but they know the value of a regular paycheck.

The streams of ignorance, cultism, and bureaucracy come together to form the only current phenomenon in San Francisco's literary life that earnestly attempts to attach itself to the avant-garde tradition: something called "language poetry," featuring the usual disjointed, self-referential mucking about with grammar. Language poets are remarkably like the new bane of the campus, "Marxist scholars"; that is, their professional incapacity is made more offensive by the emptiness of their posturing. The most egregious puffer among the language poets is a seemingly pleasant fellow named Barrett Watten (at least he appears pleasant in his photographs), who recently saw a book of his ostensibly critical writings published by a university publisher.[1] Most of the book is not critical in the conventional sense of the word, since Watten's main object is to boost the members of his language poetry club. Mostly it displays a coy dancing about with terminology appropriated from serious linguistics. Nevertheless, thanks to the miracle of there being an actual hardbound volume in print that celebrates language poetry—and thanks to the assiduous cultivation of the poetry *apparatchiki* with leftism and hot air—the language poets have attained a status on the San Francisco scene only slightly less advantageous, at least in the short term, than that of the favored poet of the Nicaraguan dictators, the dreadful Ernesto Cardenal.

When Tom Clark, the accomplished poet and critic, sent a few humorous shafts in Watten's direction recently in the pages of *The San Francisco Chronicle,* the outraged forces of the new dispensation replied in a manner so absurd that it merits recording in the annals of literary buffoonery. The friends of Watten enlisted George Lakoff, a linguistics professor at Berkeley who originally mainly concerned himself with topics derived from mathematical logic. He declared Watten a fine fellow and a great writer, although he neglected to cite any good poems by Watten, and he carefully avoided giving the impression that he takes Watten seriously as a scholarly colleague.

Lakoff's performance as an intellectual arbiter was about as graceful as that of an old-fashioned circus fat man attempting *Swan Lake.* This is not to say, however, that a cross-fertilization between poetry and linguistics is necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, such a cross-fertilization was the impetus behind the major literary developments associated with the "Prague Circle" of the 1930s, that gathering of exiled Russian critics and scholars—like Roman Jakobson, the great phonologist—and Czech poets and scholars. Likewise, something valuable came out of Jakobson's dialogues with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Breton in New York during the Second World War.

But Lakoff, with all his fine qualities (and he certainly has them), is no Jakobson. Jakobson was a product, rather than an observer, of literary life in Russian during the period of war and revolution. Nor by a grant of mercy can Watten be compared with the Czech poets, whose number includes the Nobel Laureate Jaroslav Seifert. Both the linguists and the poets of that time were disciplined thinkers first and manda-

1 *Total Syntax,* by Barrett Watten. Southern Illinois University Press; 241 pages, $13.95.

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rins second. Like many another contestant in today's intellectual arena, Watten has the order of things confused.

What, the reader will ask, does language poetry consist of? Probably the most representative example is a long poem by Watten entitled "Progress," which was published in book form this year.[2] The work consists of well over a hundred pages of poetry, each with five stanzas. It begins as follows:

> Relax,
> stand at attention, and.
> Purple snake stands out on
> Porcelain tiles. The idea
> IS the thing. Skewed by design . . . .
>
> One way contradictory use is to
> Specify empty.
> Basis, its
> Cover operates under insist on,
> Delineate. Stalin as a linguist . . . .

In addition to the poem's familiar narcissism and labored artiness, so common to this kind of undergraduate experimentalism, it is worth noting the callously neutral reference to Stalin, the notorious murderer of poets. Stalin was not a linguist—most Westerners would be amused by the very idea. Nevertheless, the "great sun of socialism," unsatisfied with his many military and political distinctions, chose this particular field of endeavor as the one in which to ordain himself a great scientific investigator. In the last demented years before his death, having purged and killed a number of distinguished researchers, he ordered the composition of a ghost-written work, to be signed by himself, on the subject of comparative linguistics. It is hard to imagine a more extreme example of the corruption of intellectual life in the service of totalitarian power. But as we all have come to know, many brilliant exemplars of the contemporary school of dictatorial statesmanship are failed scholars and writers. Pol Pot is a graduate of the Sorbonne; Bernard Coard, murderer of Grenadian schoolchildren in the purge preceding the American rescue mission, was trained as an economist; Abimael Guzman ("Gonzalo"), the crazed founder of the terrorist Sendero Luminoso in Peru, wrote his graduate thesis on the theory of space in Kant.

It should be no surprise, then, that in the controversy that took place in *The Chronicle* (and elsewhere) between Tom Clark and the Watten-Lakoff alliance the latter attempted to characterize their critics in political terms, as "Reaganites" and "counterrevolutionaries." All this playing about can be humorous, but one is saddened to realize that the amateurs of such rhetoric have yet to understand the consequences of such political labeling in Russia, Cuba, etc. But perhaps that can be overlooked: leftist insults have become an inevitable part of our country's public discourse. Without doubt the most ridiculous moment in the whole fiasco came when Professor Lakoff compared the language poets' attempt at an intellectual coup d'état with "workers taking over a factory." The pathos here is inherent in the obsolescence of the conceit. Leftism long ago forgot about workers and factories; that's too much like Poland, a "Reaganite" concern. A better comparison might be the purge and murder of the Salvadoran leftist poet Roque Dalton, in 1975, by members of a guerrilla movement he founded.

Of course, as within every group dedicated to creative enterprises (no matter how questionable their value), there are some good elements even among the language poets. Lyn Hejinian, one of their number, will probably some day find a way to real attainment. Most of the rest, however, fit in with the general panorama of trendiness and "types." Indeed, "characters" of a rare preciosity abound in the environment of San Francisco, and they are not limited to language-poetry circles. There is the defrocked Ivy League professor who, having convinced himself in a transport of lysergic acid that having no knowledge of a language is no impediment to translating it, has embarked on a career of pretending to translate ob-

2 *Progress,* by Barrett Watten. Ruth Books; 120 pages, $7.50.

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scure languages—from Albanian to Zulu—entirely in the manner of Communist slogan-poetry. His appearance in the espresso houses with a new dictionary under his arm is a favorite occasion for many. There is the female near-prep-school graduate who, thanks to an accident of pigmentation, has had herself anointed a Third World advocate, penning endless and unreadable rhapsodies to gang violence and heroin. There is the bewigged septuagenarian who carries around snapshots of Tennessee Williams and Marlon Brando, whom he claims to have debauched, the better to claim his right to the title "hot gay poet." There is the producer of New Wave music who set up a business producing outstandingly turgid critical books on such writer pop-stars as William Burroughs and J. G. Ballard. Ballard, incidentally, a former science-fiction writer of marginal cleverness, has recently turned to a more old-fashioned, descriptive mode of novel writing; but the San Francisco New Waver in question remains undisturbed by the sudden irrelevance of his unsellable critical tomes. Finally, there is a type unto itself: the unspeakable, long-wearing crony of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, a one-man war on all civilization.

Enough of types, enough of cults, of commissars, of fakery! Is there nothing of value on the San Francisco scene that could, even remotely, be called avant-garde? No city so beautiful, so wealthy, so populated with educated people, can remain unfruitful forever. After all, there are some good things happening in more traditional aspects of the Bay Area's cultural life: we have Evan S. Connell, Jr., a fine professional writer; we have magnificent scholars at Berkeley and Stanford; we have Larry Liebert, Thomas Sowell, and other political journalists of a high order; we have a respectable opera company; and God knows we have successful rock bands. Why should we not have at least one or two good avant-garde writers?

Perhaps we do. The San Francisco-born poet Philip Lamantia, the only genuine Surrealist poet in America, continues to produce meaningful work. Lamantia had the bad luck to be mobbed by a group of spectacularly untalented sycophants in the middle Seventies, but he has shaken them off. Like all good poets, he has turned to nature for his subject: specifically, regional bird life. It is a wise choice, for the intellectual landscape is uninspiring. The poet Robert Duncan maintains his estimable efforts. Another poet of Lamantia's generation, Howard Hart, has also continued to write well, using the unstructured lines of Fifties' verse with wit and restraint. A young poet too long tainted by association with the Ferlinghetti party, Neeli Cherkovski, has, after many tries, finished a good, technically inventive, publishable novel about California called *Angels' Flight.* Another young poet, Jim Brook, an unorthodox fan of French Surrealism, has, in the best tradition of Breton, bravely challenged the regional chorus of praise for the Sandinistas by publishing articles that decry the cultural policy of the current Nicaraguan regime—its censorship, its brutality, its lies, its loud Stalinist echoes. I have mentioned Lyn Hejinian; there is also Eric Walker, a young poet who shows real promise. A few others, like Tom Clark, cannot really be labeled San Franciscans yet.

Perhaps in the end it will be better for them if they are not. For even the most distinguished literary efforts here seem destined for neglect, surrounded as they are by that notorious atmosphere of mediocrity and trendiness of which those truly on the "San Francisco scene" appear so inordinately proud.

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Italo Calvino 1923-1985

by James Gardner

An ancient adage counsels us to speak only well of the deceased, and the recent and untimely death of Italo Calvino, at the age of sixty-one, has provoked in almost all quarters a confirmation, if not an escalation, of the enthusiasm that greeted his work for over a generation. It is fitting that Calvino's death should sadden us, because his writings were characterized by a broad humanity, a compelling ingenuity, and above all the constant promise, while he lived, that he might finally consolidate within a single work of art those scattered passages of excellence that are present in all his works.

Since only a very few writers in any generation are treated to the degree of adulation that Calvino enjoys at this moment, it must be the purpose of any critical essay to test whether indeed his virtues reside in those elements of his work that have been praised, whether such praise has been excessive, and, most disturbing of all, whether the universal enthusiasm for Calvino's writing did not in fact undermine his artistic integrity. Such has been the exuberance of the praise with which Calvino's writings have been received that any critic who demurs from total capitulation to this author's mystique, especially in the present circumstance of his death, is likely to seem something of a crank. Perhaps to demur will seem to contravene the fine adage already cited, one can only say that in an ideal world all people would judge things at their proper worth and critics would not be needed, but the truth is that critics have been sent forth into a post-lapsarian world to be always slightly at odds with the prevailing opinion, correcting it when it has gone too far, or when it has not gone far enough, in the way of praise.

It must seem almost inconceivable to anyone acquainted with only the rarefied fictions of *Cosmicomics* (1965) or the structuralist experimentation of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969)[1] that their author could ever have announced, as he did in 1955, that "We are in a state of emergency. Let us not exchange the terror [*terribilità*] of writing for the terror of reality; let us not forget that it is against reality that we must fight, even if we avail ourselves of the weapons of words." How different is even the style of this prose from that measured stasis of Calvino's more recent writing; a whole culture is reflected in the strident cadences of its declamation, echoing as it does back to the oratory of Mazzini and Garibaldi, translated into the postwar idiom of the Neo-Realists, and suffused with all the urgency of Camus. Is this truly the utterance of a man who in less than a generation would be signing his name to pallid Barthesian essays on Groucho's cigar or Saul Steinberg's pen?

Yet the reputation that Calvino enjoys in this country is founded almost entirely upon these later writings, which might be charac-

1 Whenever a novel or story by Calvino has been translated, its title will be given in English.

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terized as "deconstructionist," since their matter seems inextricably involved with the act of reading, and the same currents that have made fashionable the philosophy of Jacques Derrida are largely responsible for causing Calvino to appear as a significant spokesman for a certain way of conceiving the universe. The same people who have found so much to like in his later writings have been slightly embarrassed by what Calvino was doing in the first half of his creative life, since this would seem to be so very much at odds with what he would go on to do as to make it impossible for a proponent of one period to have much use for anyone who favored the other. Indeed, unless a reader had already been tipped off, it is unlikely that he would ever realize that works as disparate as *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (1963) and *Cosmicomics* could have proceeded from a single imagination, although in fact only two years divide them.

The reason for which the early fiction of Calvino has constituted an embarrassment to many of his admirers on this side of the Atlantic, who came into the act in time to adore only his more recent efforts, is the boldness and obviousness with which these first endeavors pose political and social questions. In these early works the freewheeling imaginativeness that has endeared him to many American readers in recent years is but rarely in evidence. The literary tradition into which Calvino emerged in adulthood, that of Neo-Realism, was one to which he would have been predisposed by inclination as well as by education. His father was active in various anarchist movements early in the century, and in his youth Calvino, by indulging Communist ideas, registered a similar disrelish for the extreme Right that was then in power. But the application of these ideas to his literature was always fairly casual, and his political impulses seem in the main to spring from the implicit but indestructible conviction, which pervades everything he ever wrote, that man is essentially good. Whether he seeks to expose the fatuity of the fascists, as in those early stories in the volume *L'entrata in guerra,* or to celebrate that Adamite freedom so dear to the hearts of anarchists and nudists, as in some of the still earlier stories included in *Difficult Loves* (1970), or finally to simplify human existence through a poetic system, as in *Invisible Cities* (1972) or *Mr. Palomar* (1983), Calvino still advocates throughout the profoundly if sometimes disastrously political position that all men are good, and that, left to their own devices, they will band together in choirs of fraternity.

In his first novel, *The Path of the Nest of Spiders* (1947), which he wrote when he was only twenty-three, Calvino depicts the latter days of the Second World War through the eyes of the rumbustious youth Pin. As in so much of the fiction of the Italian Neo-Realist movement, this novel is really about that constant and irreducible human reality which, it is contended, no historical or political movement can ever eradicate, though it may send it into hiding. The German soldiers who patronize Pin's sister, a local prostitute, are drawn with a humanity no less generous than that which Calvino has given the Italians, and both sides of the conflict are made to appear helplessly caught in an historical process set in motion and sustained by chance and stupidity.

As is evident in the sense of urgency with which they are so often filled, this and other early writings in his Neo-Realist phase reflect the influence of philosophical movements, like existentialism, which were in vogue in the years immediately after the Second World War. But they also presage the more dulcet and graceful tendencies that would evolve only much later in Calvino's career, and which it may be accurate to consider more essentially his own. These proclivities are present in some of his earliest short stories, as in those contained in the two volumes *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1949) and *I racconti* (1958), which were published together in the volume *Difficult Loves.* Here he indulges, even if at a humbler level, in those tricks that would later make him famous. One of these is the inverted perspective, whereby he, the author, adopts the point of view of the character who is narrating the

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tale, even when that viewpoint is diametrically opposed to his own. In "A Goatherd at Luncheon," for instance, Calvino relates an incident that occurs within an affluent and upper-middle-class family, when the overly exuberant father invites a peasant to dine with them. This story is related from the perspective of the younger son of the household, who looks with a mixture of horror and condescending pity upon the downtrodden representative of the lower classes. This tale is surely one of very few in the canon of modern literature in which the story is told entirely from the point of view of the snob, who is made to appear as rational as can be, and who, above all, instinctively assumes that the reader, to whom he is telling the story, could not possibly feel otherwise. Thus the traditional reader of modern fiction, who is most comfortable seeing things from the perspective of the underdog, especially in Neo-Realist fiction, is here co-opted against his will into company in which he feels sure he doesn't belong. Similarly, in "A Ship-load of Crabs," we are made to see things from the point of view of very young children, to share in their conflicts, and once again to feel as our own those tribulations which we thought we had overcome when we turned ten. This technique, which approaches stream of consciousness, is present in works as disparate as *The Path of the Nest of Spiders,* his foremost Neo-Realist work, with its adolescent protagonist Pin, and the much more recent *t zero* (1967) with its postmodern narrator Qfwfq. Calvino has achieved this more through sympathy than through mimicry, for mimicry has never been one of his strong points; and although he is constantly passing judgment, this judgment is always benign. It is perhaps indicative of some secret falling out between Calvino and the Neo-Realists that in his early fiction, especially in the three war stories in the volume *L'entrata in guerra,* he is always least effective when relating the incidents of the Second World War. Perhaps this is because he is least likely in this context to practice those tricks in which most of his skill resided from an early age.

The *Stories of Love and Sickness* (1949), which were included in *I racconti,* are interesting in the history of the oeuvre of Calvino, since they would seem to announce a tendency that became of major importance for him later on. This volume comprises eight tales, and their titles, such as "The Adventure of a Poet" and "The Adventure of a Clerk," have a decidedly Chaucerian ring to them. Indeed, they are even narrated in that deadpan poker-faced tone, at once familiar and distant, that Boccaccio introduced into Italian literature. It is in these works that we see the origins of an interest that would later induce Calvino, in the mid-Fifties, to take on the task of editing and rephrasing two hundred Italian fables, as well as paraphrasing Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso.* This fabulistic tendency is present in many of the later works, like *The Castle of Crossed Destinies,* and especially in the three imaginative works from the 1950s that have been published together in Italy under the title *I nostri antenati* (1960), and that have been translated into English as *The Baron in the Trees, The Cloven Viscount,* and *The Nonexistent Knight.* What links all these works, and constitutes an implicit attack upon the aesthetic of Neo-Realism, is the fact that they all take place in the past, in the eighth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, and in a context not of the lower and middle classes but rather of the feudal aristocracy, who are as remote as could be from adolescent heroes like Pin. Furthermore, the heroes are the recipients of a curious and even supernatural destiny, by which their lives are irreversibly altered. In *The Nonexistent Knight,* an empty suit of armor is miraculously inspired with the power to move of its own will; in *The Cloven Viscount,* the eponymous hero, as he joins battle with the Turks, is split into two halves, each of which assumes a life of its own; and in *The Baron in the Trees,* a young man resolves early on in life to make his home in the trees of his baronial estate and never to descend, even though he lives on to an advanced age and receives as visitors toward the end of his life such estimable personages as Napoleon and Voltaire.

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These three works struck their first critics as signaling a decidedly radical departure from the style of writing that one had come to associate with Calvino, and it was easy to believe, with the publication of such sturdily Neo-Realist works as *La Nuvola di Smog* and *La Formica Agentina,* both from 1958, and *La giornata d'uno scruttatore* and *La speculazione edilizia,* both from 1963, that those three earlier works had been merely an aberration which might yet be accommodated within a larger and more traditional context. But in fact, as is now well known, the three novels comprised in *I nostri antenati* are really presentiments, if not fulfillments, of a tendency which would become more and more dominant in Calvino's writing as the years went on, and which, as we have seen, had its origins in his very earliest short stories.

As has already been suggested, it is the growing interest in science which informs the shorter fiction in *Cosmicomics* and *t zero,* although these works are in effect the translation into a more exotic vocabulary of the earlier Neo-Realist short stories which Calvino had written in the Forties. They express the same very human longings and frustrations that were found in the early fiction, and the title under which these earlier works were collected, *Difficult Loves,* would serve to describe them as well.

Despite the presence in *Cosmicomics* and *t zero* of a profusion of scientific references, and chic effusions in the manner of Barthes and Derrida, Calvino was really an unsystematic thinker at best, and he has used these borrowings most effectively where they serve only to underscore or to enhance the emotional content that was equally present, if in another form, in his Neo-Realist works. Calvino was by nature a timid and introspective intelligence. For many years he served in the capacity of editor at the important Italian publishing firm of Einaudi in Turin, and this fact, combined with his native, if desultory, inquisitiveness, brought him into contact with works on many different subjects. But as far as can be deduced from his fiction and his occasional forays into expository prose, neither his knowledge nor his thought was ever especially profound or brilliant, although they often provided the context and the form for a sensibility that could go quite deep. With respect to his scientific and structuralist modes, Calvino is closer to a florist than to a botanist. Where the botanist perceives an indissoluble unity within a single organism, all of whose parts, from the deepest roots to the topmost petals, are involved in a relentless process of reciprocal and dynamic engendering and necessitation, the florist can perceive only the prettiness of the flowers, which strike him as an accomplished and disembodied fact. Calvino's knowledge of the sciences is characterized in the highest degree by superficiality, which it is important to bear in mind, considering that many people place him on a higher level of scientific sophistication. He has merely applied to a modern context (though one that even now is becoming slightly dated) the imaginative exorbitancies of older poets like Boiardo and Ariosto, whose *Orlando Furioso,* as we have seen, he prepared in an updated version for Einaudi. What the world looked like before the advent of color, or what the fish were thinking as they began their trek onto the dry land upon which they would become in due course lizards and birds, are the sort of questions that poets rather than scientists ask. Nor is this merely to chastise Calvino for not being more of a scientist, or for being in fact a pseudo-scientist. It is to insist that the mystique and vogue that this pseudo-methodology takes should not be allowed, as they usually are, to enter into our assessment of his literary worth. Calvino is never especially good at considering a scientific fact in its natural context; he is able to appreciate it only in its phenomenal nakedness. Essential to the scientific method is a complete confidence in the laws of cause and effect, and these Calvino makes no effort to understand. This is not to criticize him for misapplying these laws or standing them on their head, though this he occasionally does, so much as to

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insist that he abstains from their application almost altogether.

In his earlier scientific fiction (for it is not "science fiction") he was content merely to stand the reality of science on its head, cooking up an engagingly imbecile story-line around the colorful facts that he had at his disposal. But in one of his most recent books, and the one most recently translated into English, *Mr. Palomar,*[2] he has rejected the principles of causation altogether. He has done this by cataloguing the naked facts of reality, rather than forcing them into a relationship like that of cause and effect, in which facts lose their individuality and autonomy, by being perceived as only parts in a new and larger whole. And in this as well Calvino shows the influence of recent philosophers, like Jacques Derrida, who have criticized the traditional paradigms of science, and have sought to go "beyond" cause and effect, by creating "texts" that subsist under a category of mind different from that of traditional Western science. This is surely the reason for which a novel like *Mr. Palomar* seems so fiercely contemporary, and one of the reasons for which it will probably come in a very short while to seem very dated indeed. Quite aside from the narrative peculiarities of this work, which will be considered below, it is characterized by an obsessive cataloguing of the reality that surrounds the narrator, who, as almost all critics have recognized, is largely a projection of the author himself.

The inspiration for a work like *Mr. Palomar* will doubtless become much clearer when his most recent book, which appeared in Italy late last year, is rendered into English. This work, titled *Collezione di Sabbia (A Collection of Sand),* brings together Calvino's more recent essays, mostly from the early 1980s. In addition to its containing essays like those already alluded to, in which the author aspires to the universal culture that Barthes at least aspired to in his *Mythologies,* Calvino has included what are really descriptions of strange and curious collections that have been amassed over the years, collections of different kinds of sand, of maps, alphabets, and physical deformations, all described in that soft-spoken and understated prose that has characterized his writing for almost two decades now. These forays into history and science are, to use the structuralist jargon by which the author was probably inspired, synchronic rather than diachronic, that is, they perceive all the data of traditional historiography and science as existing, not in hierarchical relations of causes to effects, but rather in terms of the contemporaneous juxtaposition of random and provocative facts. As it occurs in the latter writings of Calvino, this critique of contemporary science, for such indeed it is, goes beyond the willful rejection of the traditional scientific method. In a field of inquiry that can go only forward and never backward, Calvino seems to me directly to confront science's native progressiveness by professing an exaggerated affection for the obsolete artifacts of an earlier science. He examines with a thoroughly unscientific pleasure the craftsmanship of old maps, astrolabes, and preposterous contraptions. He has Mr. Palomar enter a cheese shop, which he typically calls a cheese museum, with all that that implies of neurotic methodology and classification, and then a butcher shop, where he soon becomes lost in baroque reveries about the infinite varieties of those commodities he has come to purchase.

Perhaps the most sustained exercise in this sort of cataloguing technique is to be found in *Invisible Cities,* an imaginary conversation between Marco Polo and Genghis Khan, in which the former narrates his travels through some fifty-five cities while the Emperor listens with mounting skepticism and annoyance. Ultimately the novel becomes a rather callow exercise in solipsism. What Calvino has produced in this work, as in so many other works within his scientific mode, is a thorough and often quite appealing processing and assimilation of

2 *Mr. Palomar,* translated by William Weaver, was published this fall by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 130 pages, $12.95.

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earlier moments in the history of the Western world. Those moments that he seems to find most appealing, as in *The Baron in the Trees,* are ones in which the culture of the West is seen at its most enfeebled and derivative. In this work he has chosen the ages of rococo and neo-classicism, in which, as in Calvino's own writings, once potent and vigorous traditions are reduced to pallid formalization and are thus most susceptible to that loving parody to which he subjects them.

But if Calvino does not show much interest beyond a very superficial one in the explicatory powers of the scientific or historical method, he shows scarcely greater interest in the rigorous method of those philosophers who influenced his writings, especially in later years. In his writings from the late Sixties and the early Seventies one finds the influence of thinkers like Barthes and the theoreticians of the Nouveau Roman, and thereafter he becomes interested in, or at least breathes the same spirit as, Jacques Derrida and the Tel Quel writers. And yet, he seems only to share in their spirit in a very casual way, and it is difficult to imagine Calvino sitting down with the texts of Barthes's more scientific inquiries into the nature of narrative, or with Derrida's impenetrable *De la grammatologie.*

It is perhaps safest to say that Calvino is very much inspired with the *Zeitgeist,* although it must be stated in his behalf that he did much to form it into its present shape. Whether he is the cause or the effect of certain of those tendencies with which he is associated is a question that is outside of the scope of the present essay, although it is my suspicion that the form itself that Calvino's writing and his thoughts took, especially most recently, will be found to have a Frenchman behind every one. But Calvino had neither the inclination nor the cast of mind truly and thoroughly to assimilate these foreign importations, any more than he had the diligence to acquire the basic principles of the scientific method. They are present merely as ornaments that decorate his native inclinations, or as vaguely construed ideas that inspire him to attempt bold literary experiments which really have little to do with what had been intended by the originators of those systems. Calvino stands to the French in something of the same relationship in which a provincial painter stands to the great masters in the academies of the capital. He is able to reproduce with a certain skill, in his case quite an admirable skill, the suavities and urbanities of the prime movers, but there is always present in his work the sense that foreign forms and manners have been allowed merely to impose themselves, like ornaments, upon a deeper and eccentric structure that really has very little to do with these decorations, and is in fact unaltered by them.

The tone of the scientific writings of the Sixties was not only very human but also touched with that gentle good humor which Calvino revealed so often and so refreshingly throughout his career. But in more recent works, which were inspired by the French and which might be considered scientific or at least "methodological" in the rigor with which they unfold, this characteristic humor is lacking and we are faced with that dour sobriety that had not been seen since *La speculazione edilizia* and *La giornata d'uno scruttatore* a decade earlier. It is not unworthy of consideration that perhaps these late works, which have been held up often enough as paragons of inventiveness and zestful caprice, are in fact the results of a partial and momentary exhaustion which manifested itself in their mirthlessness. For although it may be debated to what degree the invention of a narrative system is an artistic act comparable with that of narration itself, the fact remains that it would have been possible for someone who was not in the mood for creativity, by applying the systems used in these two works, to wind up with a novel of the required length. In *Invisible Cities,* as we have seen, the plot reduces itself to a dialogue between Marco Polo and Genghis Khan, interspersed with, and dominated by, the description, one after the other, of fifty-five cities. These descriptions are often quite inventive and

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beautiful, but the plot really does not carry itself with conviction, and a sense of sluggish homogeneity begins to set in early on, as it did in Calvino's collection of Italian fables. If it is the cataloguing method that inspires this work, his next work, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies,* is a boring application to the short story of the narrative principles which the structuralists would have us believe to inhere in some important sense in a pack of tarot cards. By drawing from the deck, Calvino explains in a pedantic epilogue, he was provided with the general outlines for the plots. If these stories were successful, and I do not feel that they were, they would be so for a few beautiful descriptions or for a dramatic scene for which the tarot had provided the context—in other words, for reasons entirely different from those of narrative technique, which are ostensibly the innovations that made the work sell to those more avant-garde readers who mistook and still mistake novelty for consequence.

At the risk of making a gross and overly bold generalization, it is just possible that not a single specimen of structuralist or post-structuralist narrative has been a valid work of art. The mind naturally balks at this, perhaps because something deeply rooted in our common humanity dislikes to see our brethren failing on so massive a scale. It seems to us inconceivable that so many people whom we respect, who have written so many impenetrable novels and have tenure, or at least are endorsed by other people who do have tenure, should be so completely wrong and in such a big way. But perhaps the reader will remember, or perhaps he will not remember, that there was a time once in the history of Western literature, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the foremost novelists were devoting themselves to long and unbearably intricate narratives inspired by the Arcadian tradition initiated by Heliodorus in his *Aethiopica.* The closest people usually want to get to this sort of thing, and most won't come even this close, is Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia,* which, shocking as this may seem to some of its readers, is only one of the better specimens of Arcadian Romance. Lyly's *Euphues,* Cervantes's *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda,* and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Clélie* are other works of which we still know the names at least, and there are without exaggeration hundreds, perhaps thousands more, of which we have mercifully lost all trace. These works were the delight of the literati and the intellectuals of their day, and like many of the narrative works that share the principles of the Nouveau Roman, or those of the authors of Tel Quel, these works are not without passages that are effective as at least "exercises de style." But they were almost completely lacking in the human warmth that fires all truly effective art, and that is why they must perforce have seemed boring to human beings even then, unless one happened to be the author or unless the true satisfaction one derived from them was that of being allowed publicly to profess pleasure for works which command the uncomprehending admiration of others. There has never been a want of people who were happy to write such narratives, and many more who were equally happy to admire them for it. But the succeeding generations turn out to be never so indulgent. No one today can understand what anyone ever saw in those Arcadian romances, which seem the quintessence of stiltedness. In the same way, those suspicions that make some of us now wonder whether much new writing might just be complete nonsense after all may gain currency hereafter, and come to dominate all considerations of what certain of our most recent writers have written. To reiterate, there are certainly beautiful passages in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *Invisible Cities,* but they are insufficient to repay the tedium generated by the rest.

We should be thankful, then, that in his two final works of fiction, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) and *Mr. Palomar,* although Calvino was inspired ostensibly by post-structuralist principles not unlike those of the two works that preceded them, still, he has leavened these last two books, especially the earlier one, with a genuine and pungent sense of humor. In

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If on a Winter's Night a Traveler, this takes the form of an inquiry into the ways in which we read a novel, for instance, the novel called *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.* A long and engaging series of reversals and *mises en abime* keep the narrative moving pleasantly through ten simulated novels, and it is to the author's credit that he has kept this from becoming boring, which it would almost certainly have done in the hands of a less skilled artist. The system of *Mr. Palomar* is divided into three sections, each with three chapters, each of which in its turn has three sub-chapters marked 1, 2, and 3. These latter chapters are supposed to correspond (they "tend" to correspond, to use Calvino's revealing expression of methodological laxness) to sensory experience in the first part, linguistic data in the second, and speculative questions in the third. It is obvious that in order to achieve this clear schema, Calvino has almost surely had either to eliminate material that simply would have run over, or to include superfluous material merely to fill in the holes in the grid. But in addition to composing some attractive prose passages, he has managed to create an appealing and pitiable personality in the eponymous hero, and, insofar as novel writing concerns the creation of memorable personalities, Calvino has at least that much of traditional achievement. It is also worth remarking that in the hierarchy implied in the ordering of 1, 2, and 3 he seems to have placed spiritual and religious questions above those of language and structure. Is this not the earliest, the truest Calvino emerging once again? In certain circles of his admirers, this fact, if it were ever to be fully appreciated, would have to be understood as a kind of apostasy.

Although the quality of Calvino's output varies considerably, he is never conspicuously bad, just as he is never truly great. That he is never conspicuously bad is, of course, only of biographical interest; in an assessment of a man's creativity, it is the possibility of excellence that alone commands our attention, and in application to Calvino the consequences of such an examination may be very sad indeed. For it is by no means impossible that Calvino might have become a much finer novelist than he turned out to be, if he had ever managed to combine in a single work the inventiveness of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* with the poetic beauty of *Invisible Cities* and the warmth of the earliest stories in *Difficult Loves. The Baron in the Trees* comes closer to this imaginary novel than does any of Calvino's other works, but still it is not a great novel, and even if it were, this fact probably would not justify the praise almost universally paid to Calvino's entire output. If the reception that Calvino received had been a bit more critical perhaps he might have gone on to create a work of such sustained excellence. But he did not achieve this, and since, in a sense, he could not help responding, especially later on, to the applause that he was receiving from all sides, and since he might have been tempted by this enthusiasm to provide his glamorous public with exactly what it wanted, in order to win still more applause, is it not possible that that adoring and insincere public has participated in neutralizing a great talent? We have seen this before and we will see it again. Surely this is one of those occasions Eliot had in mind when, as he lamented, "fools' approval stings and honor stains"!

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Paris possessed
by Dan Hofstadter

Something remarkable happened to Eugène Atget whenever he came near to the river Marne: he found himself able to draw an almost baptismal joy from the landscape. This, at least, is what you sense in his photographs. There's one in particular I'm thinking of. The air in this picture is holy; the water is holy; the lone angler is a veritable saint of "atmosphere." The myriad reflections of trees and boats stretch away in stillness to a pair of Lombardy poplars mounting sentry against the sky. Everything here is perfect: it's all so neatly locked together that if you rocked a skiff in the foreground the trees in the distance would shudder. One reach of water imprisons in its burnished pavement the essence of the Île-de-France.

The area around Paris is known for its Gothic towers, but Atget seems never to have climbed to the top of any one of them with his camera. The unfolding green design of the market gardens, the racing cloud shadows, the inevitable approaching rainstorm—these things were not for him. He preferred to head down toward the nearest river, to wander—judging by the angle of his views—along the ancient towing paths, which even in his day were probably overgrown with stinging nettles and St. John's wort, and already separated by trees from the water. More often—you can see it from the shots—he is tramping along a dirt road. Rainwater gleams in a rut. He spies a thatched cottage with its windows tucked under its eaves, and he plants his camera right beside it so it will fill his ground glass. Or he stops in a village street and composes his picture with a few yards of cobblestones and eight or ten houses. It is not light and shadow which particularly tell here—sunshine in the Île-de-France is fickle anyway—but the local textures of things, the speckled aggregates and knobby surfaces, the mottled, the grooved, the veined. The relative amounts of these textures are as important as they are in cookery. You take three parts of roughcast masonry, two of paving stones, a sprig of wisteria, and so on and so forth, and *voilà*—terrine of village.

The taste for Atget's photographs, once rare, has by now become nearly universal. One sign of this is the mass diffusion of his pictures. The best collection of these is the luxurious new four-volume set entitled *The Work of Atget,*[1] which was issued by the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Graphic Society to coincide with a major show held earlier this year. It features good to excellent sepia reproductions, together with thoughtfully written essays and notes by Maria Morris Hambourg and John Szarkowski. Though there are plenty of good Atget photos that do not appear in these four books,

1 The four volumes of *The Work of Atget,* published between 1981 and 1985 by the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Graphic Society, are: *Old France* (180 pages, $40); *The Art of Old Paris* (192 pages, $40); *The Ancien Régime* (192 pages, $40); and *Modern Times* (192 pages, $45).

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they still offer the fullest overview of his images to appear in print thus far.

From about 1891 to his death in 1927, Atget took over seven thousand photographs of the hamlets of the Île-de-France, the architecture, decoration, and street life of Paris, and the suburban parks of Versailles, Saint-Cloud, and Sceaux. These prints went into his commercial image bank, and could be borrowed, for a fee, by illustrators, artists, and researchers. The primary value of *The Work of Atget*, then, is that it enables the viewer to sense the overall structure and purpose of Atget's archive. But it is also a treasure trove of hitherto rarely seen pictures that will enrich and may alter our view of his work. Chief among these are the many photos of rural France that appear in Volume One, for it turns out that the most urban of all photographers adored the country. We learn that he favored the villages south of Paris for his excursions; unlike the northern suburbs, they retained their rusticity well into this century, and were easily reached from the Gare Montparnasse or the railway station at Denfert-Rochereau. Atget lived at 17 bis rue Campagne-Première, an old street in Montparnasse where hundreds of artists and artisans lived. Rimbaud had dwelt there; Modigliani would do so too; the Douanier Rousseau, to whom Atget has often been likened, worked, until his death in 1910, not far away, in the rue Vercingétorix. Montparnasse in those days was a little universe of solfège teachers, sign painters, painter-decorators, scribblers, and other well-trained foot soldiers of the arts. Atget was one of their number, a skilled craftsman who made two-dimensional equivalents of what the *mouleurs d'art,* the manufacturers of plaster casts, had been making for centuries in the shadow of the Faculté de Médecine. Nonetheless, he must have looked, as he ventured forth on one of his outings, clad in his long overcoat and bent under the weight of his rucksack of glass plates, like one of those exotic itinerant types who so often figure in his pictures.

In his first years as a photographer of the countryside Atget tended to concentrate on studies of semi-isolated subjects: a few lilies, an arch of pleached pear trees, a constellation of rambler roses. What he was doing wasn't really landscape photography: there are no broad sweeps here, no receding copses or harmonious stands of trees. Instead he singled out particular plants as if for salvation, for membership in a botanical elect. He seemed to desire fellowship and the personal note. Presented as successive plates in a book, these photos gain thematic weight. You can feel Atget's tread along the country lanes, and you can vaguely sense that his outings are akin to some of the other rhapsodic excursions of the period: some of Ravel's music, perhaps, or parts of Proust's huge novel. Atget's suburban albums—what he called the "Old France" series—held over a thousand prints. As he grew more fascinated by rustic architecture he began to weave in and out of the same half dozen villages, catching the same stone structures under different effects of light, returning to the same blessed spots after a few hours or a few years. There's a whiff of spring about his pictures: orchards in blossom, freshly tilled fields, a profusion of timothy and wild oats and blurry wildflowers. Though one may legitimately talk about Atget's love of nature, there is little nature here in the North American sense of primitive, virginal growth. There is only "culture," which to the French connotes the cultivation of plant strains as well as of minds. The gnarled, wild-looking willows in Atget's photos have in fact been carefully pollarded for the osier-weavers; and I suspect that even the occasional ancient oak or beech has been deliberately spared to hold the soil against the ruin of time, or to serve as a witness-tree. It has often been said, correctly I think, that Atget's lifework is itself a species of testimonial. He documents a symbiosis, a rare wisdom in the matter of what goes with what. *A boire sur fruits de mer . . . sur pâtés . . . sur viandes blanches,* counsel the wine columns in the French newspapers about this or that vintage. Atget too is gesturing toward exemplary affinities: "This sundial in this little court . . ."

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Atget's tight shots of village architecture remind me of old "tupenny-ha'penny" cardboard stage settings for finger puppets. The world is seen as in a shoe box. There's a foreground and a middleground but no distance. Short streets curve rapidly out of sight; prospects are screened by masonry or a dense trained vine. It's not that you feel lonely here—a white-haired *p'tit pépère* with a cockerel under his arm could come round the bend at any moment—but there's a sense that the rectangle of vision is a sealed chamber somewhat analogous to the camera itself. Rarely is a glimpse of the surrounding landscape afforded, and even the sky is largely blocked, which is a boon, because Atget's old-fashioned negatives had no receptivity, it seems, to the tonal nuances of clouds. His camera also lacked any provision for "movements," which meant that he couldn't align rectangular structures with the edges of his viewing screen. Things cant and sway, like jolly elderly uncles. Studying these country images, you sense after a while that Atget simply treated himself to whatever might claim—by extending the circumference of his affection—to be an authentic part of his life. "Intimizing" the outdoors, he often showed a charming insouciance, as when he brought back, from a visit to a château, a negative of the poultry yard. Such wafer-thin pictorial slices he called "picturesque corners," using the word "corner" not only in its metaphorical connotation of "neighborhood" but also, as one gradually discovers, in its strictly physical sense as well. For most of his corners fall into two quite concrete types. One is the corner as wedge, the projecting house- or streetcorner. The other is its complement, the inside angle that is formed where one wall of a courtyard meets another. Courtyards are really a species of outdoor room, and though Atget made quite a few negatives of courtyards outside Paris, it was in the city itself, rich in such shadowy cavities, that he would one day turn this sort of picture into a veritable genre.

Nowadays we tend to be bothered by the idea of an artist letting his work be influenced by non-artistic considerations. Yet Atget was such an artist: his photographs have preservationist undertones, the subjects almost pleading to be left as they are. His selection of sites also reveals pronounced architectural preferences. He didn't photograph the Eiffel Tower or any of the great steel-and-glass railway stations. He got up early to avoid having motorcars in his pictures. He was uninterested in the Madeleine and the Bourse and the newly opened Ritz, though I doubt that he failed to notice that all three of them—the seats respectively of religion and capital and ostentation—had somewhat similar temple façades. By sticking largely to quaint stone or brick houses fronting on narrow streets he was, consciously or unconsciously, reflecting the populist bias of the artisan class under the Third Republic.

Though Atget photographed the vanishing order of things, his handling of space and composition sometimes anticipates the modern camera work that followed him. The question of his ambiguous relation to modernism is treated with tact and perspicuity by Maria Morris Hambourg and John Szarkowski in their commentaries to the present volume. Many people perform contortions nowadays trying to prove that what they like is part of the modernist mainstream. It's as if a chef were to slaughter a pig at your table to show that your chop is fresh. Mrs. Hambourg and Mr. Szarkowski are merciful enough to leave the pig behind at the farm; if there are "virtues of omission" they will surely get into heaven for omitting to discuss, except very briefly, the "aesthetics of photography." It has often been observed that many of Atget's photographs are far from technically perfect—"blocked" in the highlights or black in the shadows, often too harshly "contrasty"—and that he accorded all his prints, whether good, bad, or indifferent, a single page in the multivolume portfolio he was creating. Mr. Szarkowski deals subtly and concisely with the problem of whether Atget's vast uneven archive is really a product of art. "We could point out," he writes,

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> that he worked both for others and for himself and that the work he did for himself was better, because it served a more demanding master. Or we could say that it was Atget's goal to explain in visual terms an issue of great richness and complexity—the spirit of his own culture—and that in service to this goal he was willing to accept the results of his best efforts, even when they did not rise above the role of simple records . . . . On practical grounds, the idea of artistic service to an artistically extraneous cause does have much to recommend it, for it invites the artist to confront interesting questions to which there are no known artistic answers . . . . He may make new mistakes, produce original failures, some of which will define new opportunities. It is possible that Atget's habit of revisiting a given motif began with the need to correct such failures.

Mr. Szarkowski also tracks the emergence of an "elegiac tone" in the botanical and architectural pictures. Much of this imagery does indeed acquire a veil of pathos, perhaps summoned up by the depredations of the 1914-1918 war; Atget photographed the Marne, for example, when that river was still a symbol of national resistance. Yet even before the war he had discovered in himself a great sympathy for the lights and shadows of timeworn things. He was after "the texture, not the text" of the past, as Mrs. Hambourg puts it. Gazing at his views of gutted Paris houses, or at his many portraits of cankered and contorted trees, their roots gripping the earth like the claws of some gigantic turkey-cock, you may begin to feel that a certain melancholy is native to this terrain. But Paris is not known as a morose place, and in fact Atget's work embraces many moods and draws upon many compositional expedients, none of which sums him up. The camera is an easy instrument with which to try out new ideas, and Atget had so liberal a view of his craft that he could pursue, at one and the same time, entirely dissimilar projects.

His most surprising affection was surely the one he conceived for three of the great estates outside Paris—Versailles, Saint-Cloud, and Sceaux. In the decade before his death in 1927, he devoted several hundred negatives to these domains, rather in the fashion of a cook who, after a lifetime interpreting bourgeois cooking, tackles *haute cuisine.* Mrs. Hambourg and Mr. Szarkowski devote a whole volume (they call it *The Ancien Régime*) to these photographs, an allotment of space which roughly reflects the great store he set by them. In those days Versailles had a special aura which it has since lost. In 1918 and 1919 it was the venue of a peace conference in which France, after decades of humiliation, reasserted her traditional role as the dominant Continental power. As the result of a gift in 1924 from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the palace and gardens, forsaken during the Revolution and largely passed over by the regimes of the nineteenth century, were on their way to being restored to something like their original splendor. Here, then, as elsewhere, Atget's enterprise, never an errand into the wilderness, built upon work undertaken by others, and his selection of this subject at this time had mild, and by no means unsympathetic, cultural-nationalist overtones.

The gardens at Versailles were designed in the 1650s by André Le Nôtre, a man trained as a painter. I believe it is correct to say that Le Nôtre's chief aim was to reconcile the effect of absolute order with that of multiplicity or variety, and on this score, at least, any visitor can attest to his success. Viewed from the house, the impression of axial order in the layout of parterres, manicured broderies, and framing shrubberies entirely dominates; yet a walk into the depth of the gardens affords ever-changing novelties of vision. Gesticulating statues, reflected in pools of water, appear to move against a background of moving clouds, and a few clever asymmetries forbid the stroller from ever composing a mental map of his surroundings. Soon he is half-lost in a living metaphor for France herself, a place at once firmly governed and full of spontaneous enchantments. Nonetheless, the common judgment of the park is that the sensation of government is rather *too* firm: many people

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find it severe, even heartless. One might think that Atget, with his love of the higgledy-piggledy, would have subscribed to this view, and steered clear of Versailles altogether. Instead he tried to make something of it.

In his pictorial stroll through this emblematic acreage Atget soon seems to stray—if I may enlist a horticultural metaphor—into the herbaceous borders. He drifts into the margins of Le Nôtre's architectural manner, his eye burrowing narrowly and obliquely through vast verdant formalities. He is at cross-purposes with the original designs. Now he slices into a story-telling sculpture group, now he digresses along a forest-skirt till it fades out of sight. You feel that he would be altogether more at ease if an English park had billowed into existence here for the Sun King; and happily for him the trees at least have obliged, having grown, during a century of desuetude, into the sort of tall, full-crowned affairs that you find in Hampstead Heath.

What Atget does here is to cut on the bias through another man's dream. This is, all told, a pretty shrewd approach when one cannot, in the nature of things, make one's own dream out of whole cloth. Atget queers Versailles, turning its classical gardens into something exceedingly Romantic. During the eighteenth century, some people (including, I believe, the great comic playwright Marivaux) started complaining that Le Nôtre's ideas had been old-fashioned from the start. They felt that he had merely blown the old Italianate garden scheme out of scale, as if Poussin had never painted; yet, as they saw it, Poussin had achieved the ideal equipoise of dressed stone and well-tended sylvan vegetation in his more Titian-influenced pictures. One suspects that Atget would have agreed; in his photos Le Nôtre's gardens are made to feel like bits out of Poussin, especially when he homes in on dramatic sculptures before a screen of dark foliage. Of course there is nothing false or distasteful in letting the camera isolate one sun-dappled statue out of a narrative group, or in letting it portray a little bosquet as a virtual forest. The problem is that such devices are all too easy, and the results correspondingly conventional. They show what your average English gentlewoman, at any time in the last two hundred years, would have wished Versailles to be, which is to say cozier in parts and wilder in parts, and tending, here and there, to ruin. The motif of great trees mirrored in the water, like that of a single statue imparting (rather empty) drama to an artificial glade, was already hackneyed in Atget's day.

It would be easy to cavil at these pictures, to complain of brutal exposures and a certain lack of tenderness in the rendition of foliage tones. I suspect that Atget's nonpanchromatic plates were none too sensitive to the color green, and that some of his starker compositions simply made a virtue of necessity. In the long shots, where objects in perspective required to be played off precisely against one another, he did not, I feel, spin his vision to a fine enough thread. Only a superb dereliction, encountered in another estate, would put him on his mettle. Prowling amid stone fragments and piles of autumn leaves, he wandered across the border of classicism into poetically uncharted latitudes. Nominally he was now in the domain of Sceaux—where Colbert's country house had once stood—but the park had wholly gone to seed by the Twenties. Mr. Szarkowski's intriguing selection of photographs reveals a place of sun-bewitched tree-boles and fungus-spotted statuary, of half-dead branches and riotous columbine. This landscape, festooned as it is with the tokens of its own continuous decay, meets the eye as pure imagination: the imagination of perpetual relinquishment. Here Atget rediscovered the fellowship of perishable things. Here, too, he could fix his gaze, not on the formal, rigid past, or the pitiless present, but on the instant of forfeiture between the two.

Though there is much to enjoy in the record of Atget's suburban outings, it is for his photographs of Paris that he first became known to the world. Parisian archivists who

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saw his prints were intrigued by his feeling for the urban condition. In 1907 the city public library asked him to make, for twice his usual fee, a topographical survey of several sections of Old Paris; in 1910 he received a commission at a similar rate of pay from the Bibliothèque Nationale to make an extensive series of pictures of Parisian life. Even after he had completed these assignments he continued to take pictures of the city and its people.

The theme of Parisian life has received a whole volume in the new four-volume set. It is called *Modern Times.* Curiously enough, the remoteness of this title from the material in the book affords a measure of how much the Paris that Atget loved was already hostage to "progress." In image after image he concentrates on the most frail or vestigial aspects of street life. Tinkers and buskers, old-fashioned brothels, crumbling bistros, quaint outlying *pavillons*—all combine to proclaim the Paris of the dawning century. Yet they are just the sort of curiosities whose disappearance anyone with an ounce of prescience could have foreseen at the time. Since they are not counterbalanced by many modern things—taxis, trucks, cranes, buses—they have a bittersweet, valedictory air.

I wonder, apropos of these pictures, how much Atget's concerns reflected the culture around him. Until recently, the French haven't been terribly interested in his work; it was, after all, an American photographer, his great friend and helper Berenice Abbott, who saved most of his negatives and prints for posterity. Yet only someone who knows French culture from the inside could explore the connections (if any) between Atget's photographs and, for instance, Arséne Houssaye's journals, or Jules Vallès's *La Rue,* or the novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans, or the poetry of Paul Fort, or Émile Verhaerens's *Les Villes tentaculaires*—all of which reveal a vivid city-sense, a flair for "the spirit of the spot." One writer who obviously did have a big influence on Atget was the man whom the French have taken to calling, on the centennial of his death, "Big Victor"—the same whom generations of wretched readers referred to as "Victor Hugo, alas." Just as whole districts of medieval Paris were being demolished, Hugo raised the old city anew in the never-never land of Romantic myth. In his writings and drawings he constructed a glamorous Gothic townscape as a home for his recurrent protagonist, The People. This Romantic daydream worked so powerfully upon the public conscience that it eventually spawned a preservationist movement which managed, among other things, to prevent the complete destruction of the Quartier de Notre-Dame on the Île de la Cité, one of Hugo's chief settings and later a major Atget motif. The photographer reportedly read every word the poet ever wrote; I cannot imagine that there was no tincture of bitterness in his feelings about urban modernization.

The wrecking ball was not the only threat to the French architectural patrimony. A new enemy, German militarism, appeared in the 1870s. By the end of the Franco-Prussian War one particular deed stood out in the French mind as emblematic of the attitude of Prussian military circles toward material French culture: the shelling of Rheims Cathedral by German troops in 1870. Rheims is far from Paris of course, it is the capital of Champagne, but its cathedral is as symbolically important to the French as Westminster is to the English: it is the church where the French kings were traditionally crowned. This attack awakened a national dread that was as lurid as it eventually proved well-founded: by Armistice Day in 1918 German troops had burned much of Rheims again and had destroyed scores of French monuments, including the Cathedral of St. Étienne in Metz, the Church of St. Wolfram in Abbeville, and most of the Abbey of Saint-Médard in Soissons, along with hundreds of ancient towns and villages. This grievous record is part of the background against which Atget's encyclopedic labor of documentation was carried forward.

The visual evidence suggests that Atget fitted so neatly into his cultural habitat that most of his photos must really be considered

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collaborations. He was as little the sole author of his architectural pictures as a theater director is the sole originator of a new production. Most of the time he was creating not with raw materials but with the products of conscious design, the finished work of master-masons, shopfitters, sign painters, couturiers. His charming shots of the carousel at the 1926 Fête de Vaugirard, for instance, would not have been possible without the unwitting aid of the creator of the revolving figures, who was none other than Paul Poiret, the great fashion designer.

One particular panoramic view clearly reveals Atget's debt to other artists. Standing on the quai aux Fleurs in the Île de la Cité, he registered with two exposures the entire sweep formed below him by the meeting of the rue des Ursins and the rue des Chantres. Together the two negatives covered a 90° angle of vision, and he pasted the resultant prints side by side in one of the albums he showed to prospective customers. On the right-hand side we look down the rue des Ursins, which meanders picturesquely into the distance; the rows of medieval or medieval-type houses on both sides form a clear and beautifully lighted enfilade. Directly across from us is the Hôtel des Deux Lions with its ground-floor café and its name spelled out along the wall in what I take to be tin or cast-iron letters in a variant of the old-fashioned "Egyptienne" type face. On its left-hand side the inn sports about six signs, including a sans-serif advertisement for hire-barrows which has left trails of rust on the building, a little projecting oval ("vins, hôtel"), an ad for the Pigier correspondence school, and so forth. Way down beyond the blind end of the rue des Chantres, inserted in a narrow slot of sky, the splendid spire of Notre-Dame looms in the early morning mist. The panorama is a representative (almost an exhaustive) picture of the tiny triangular neighborhood once known as the Quartier de l'Ancien Cloître. You might think that it was one of the last purely medieval sights in Paris, and that that was why Atget selected it. Yet a quick consultation of any good Paris guidebook would reveal this conclusion to be inexact. Spared by Baron Hausmann, the quarter had been partially restored by the time Atget arrived on the scene. Even the tower hanging in the distant air was actually a recent addition. It is the spire above the transept of Notre-Dame, erected (according to twelfth-century plans) by the great restorer Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc in the mid-nineteenth century. One might even say, by way of self-instructive exaggeration, that much of what Atget was looking at was in the nature of a modern mirage, an inspired piece of Romantic scenography. It had been deliberately refashioned as a focus for educated sightseeing, and its author was, in a more than figurative sense, "Big Victor," for it was the publication of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1841 which had sparked the restorations on the Île de la Cité. In 1845, Viollet-le-Duc (who at the age of twenty-six had already been appointed to restore Vézelay by Hugo's friend Prosper Merimée, then commissioner of public monuments) commenced work on the cathedral. It was to take him twenty-one years to bring it to its final perfection, and to tart up the interior of the nearby Sainte-Chapelle until it became the psychedelic chocolate box that we see today. I find the question of Atget's debt to Viollet-le-Duc an interesting one; the problem with trying to elucidate it is simply that there were so many Viollet-le-Ducs. The man was, it seems to me, a fine draughtsman yet a poor designer, a brilliant theoretician yet a nearly unreadable writer. His restoration of the cathedral church at Vézelay is surely one of the great architectural masterpieces of the last century, bringing a visionary conception of the Middle Ages to life before our very eyes. But what is one to make of the Château de Pierrefonds, for example, with its mix-and-match "Gothic" interior, full of sculpted salamanders, eagles, storks, and cats? Most educated French people used to hold Viollet-le-Duc in contempt; now they are not so sure. Was he a historicist vandal or a "postmodernist" *avant la lettre* whose flamboyant piles stand directly athwart the architectural mainstream, somewhere between Strawberry

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Hill and the Disneyland Castle? One doesn't know quite what one feels, which makes it all the harder to guess how Atget felt. He didn't (to our knowledge) own copies of Viollet-le-Duc's two treatises, but he did photograph a lot of the man's work, along with the collections (now in the Cluny Museum) of his colleague Alexandre du Sommerard. What seems to me incontrovertible is that Atget's taste was in some ways close to Viollet-le-Duc's. There is a populist and romantic-nationalist strain in both men's affection for pre-Renaissance French architecture. Many of Atget's rustic and even urban views could be used to illustrate Viollet-le-Duc's conception of the primeval Gallic house, which is quite like your basic Monopoly hotel, blown up to a modest scale and executed in stone. Both men doted on gabled cottages and Romanesque and Gothic churches. As Viollet-le-Duc had restored the French picturesque, so Atget documented it, though his documentation was by far the purer expression of attachment.

Atget's two-part panorama of the Quartier de l'Ancien Cloître wouldn't be interesting if it only acknowledged his cultural debts. It also acquits them by parlaying them into a unique contribution. The American painter and critic Fairfield Porter used to say that one should look for the abstraction in realist pictures and ask what abstract pictures tell us about the world. Though it doesn't help to regard photographs as one does paintings, this two-print panorama can, I think, be compared to a piece of graphic design, like, say, a magazine spread with type, which is surely an abstract sort of visual presentation. One notes the dextrous placement of scores of tiny squares, the delicate apportionment of sepia tones. The profusion of printed, stamped, and stenciled type brings the whole piece up to a machine-cut pitch of perfection. Gorgeous and various in itself, the type also pins down the image on the page, balances it on its own axes. Atget, like many Frenchmen of his generation, had an excellent eye for letterforms; following him through the streets of Paris sometimes reminds me of what it's like to window-shop there with an observant commercial designer, someone who at every step points out how smartly that show card goes with that blouse, or how daintily that poster makes its pitch for that brand of aperitif. It is all a beguiling demonstration of how the picturesque may be mated with the everyday and even with the vulgar. By marrying photography to printed type Atget not only registers this accommodation but also embodies it; stooping under his focusing cloth on the quai des Fleurs, he too becomes a part of the big picture, a living lesson in what "goes" with what.

It might seem a willful vagary to speak of Atget as an exponent of the picturesque, for he is usually portrayed as a classicizing and a modern photographer. Yet over and over, it is the patently picturesque that he singles out to record—boats along the Seine, queer old tavern-signs, the ghostly residence of André Chénier, the great poet who was guillotined during the Terror. When confronted with classical symmetry and pomp he throws himself upon the mercy of the trees in the boulevard, or the chimney pots on high, or even the weather—whatever will screen or half-hide the vexing grandiosities in question. If it is not utterly perverse of him he will decline to inspect a façade head-on but will sidle rather to the left or to the right, to secure two elevations, front and side, of his subject—his famous love of "corners" once again. He will place his camera so that blocks of houses appear laterally askew and the eye is forced to zigzag along the build-up of two-point perspective. For the commoner brand of stateliness he hasn't a care: when he crouches in the public gardens to line up the Luxembourg Palace behind a droopy pinnacle of bellflowers, you almost forget that it is the senate house of a great republic which he is snapping.

One reason that Atget may not usually be thought of as a photographer of the picturesque is that the word is so hard to define. The expression "picturesque architecture" brings different effects to the minds of different people, and no single effect seems essential to everyone. Such qualities as I have

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just described in regard to Atget's imagery may well enter one's mind; others are randomness, novelty, strong contrasts of light and shade, sculptural depth of relief, and richness of edges, especially those which tell against the sky. But the one attribute which almost anyone would associate with the picturesque is age. Fine architecture is meant—in Ruskin's famous phrase—to last "for ages"; it "connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations." So the English critic informs us in "The Lamp of Memory," an essay which, in its concern for the monumental and commemorative aspects of the urban environment, bears directly upon Atget. Ruskin claims that there is a loveliness in the effects of time which nothing else can replace, and which we naturally tend to desire. The marks of age may be regarded as evidence of resistance to ruin, or as so many prophecies of ultimate doom; but however we see them, they embody what he calls "an actual beauty"—that is, as I take it, an indwelling or inherent one. This "actual beauty" is very close to what we commonly call "texture" when scrutinizing Atget's images; and thinking of texture in this way, we begin to surmise why it can sometimes compel an almost silly devotion in which our whole being consents.

To pore over Atget's photos of Old Paris is to promenade your gaze through the choicest precincts of shared memory. A national identity is recaptured, while a sympathy widely transnational—the recognition of aesthetic fellow-citizenship—clots around cherished monuments. At the same time, Atget's perceptions reach into the personal realm. Often enough you are left in the street with only the vapor of your emotions for company. The little courtyards in which you so often find yourself are not only "picturesque corners," they are also condensation chambers for misty, indistinct feelings. To contemplate, from the *porte-cochère,* the forecourt of the townhouse at 1 rue de la Perle, at the edge of the Marais—the former residence of Libéral Bruant, architect of the Invalides—is to surrender to a reverie of secluded elegance. From the moiré of the cobblestones to the roof tiles rising behind the garlanded pediment, everything is in keeping with everything else. Even the recessed concierge's bell at your right hand prettily echoes the shape of the five oculi in Bruant's façade. It is all so jammily stained and freckled and foxed that you're set at once to move in. The centuries have been doing it up for you; you've been fondly remembered by people long dead at your birth.

Atget has framed this scene to suggest a secret chamber, a stone bower for an antiquarian taste. It is penetrated by a single shaft of light. Though this sunbeam is adequately rendered, Atget has "exposed" primarily for local patina, not stark lighting effects. Wanting the richest variegation of local tones compatible with clarity and simplicity, he keys his picture, in effect, to texture, to Ruskin's "actual beauty." In so doing he seizes upon an affinity of medium and motif. Photography can capture patina with far greater ease than can painting or drawing, where the very attempt easily declines into a cramped fussiness. Atget handily achieves the tonal effects, for example, that Piranesi had to strain for. Like Atget, the Italian was drawn to subtle shifts of tone on the surface of weathered antiquities; but in attempting to describe them with an etcher's needle he often muddied up his light-struck planes, so that some of his pages look oddly blotchy or smeared. In photography, only the grossest underexposure of negatives will allow this to happen. Old masonry, like signs on walls, seems to call for the camera as its natural instrument of representation.

A view into the courtyard at 28 rue Bonaparte, off Saint-Germain-des-Prés, excites emotions quite different from those raised by the image of Bruant's mansion. We are positioned parallel to a dank stone stairway which leads up four steps to a landing, then divides. One side winds into a broad, inky proscenium where only an occasional balus-

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ter, standing out against a patch of faint light, reassures us that the stairway ascends. On a sort of flying arch over this stagey stairwell is inscribed, in huge letters, the legend LIBRAIRIE. Two hunched doors lead down into the presumed cellar of this gloomy establishment; they seem reserved respectively for Quasimodo and Fantômas. The whole place is like a Piranesian *carcere,* or prison, an evocative, proto-expressionist stage-setting—architecture spiced by fear. Here the picturesque, turned inside out, summons up only morbid or horrifying fantasies.

I am in doubt how the sensibility exemplified by this and some six or eight other photos should be characterized; perhaps as a Romantic delight in the grotto-like, the "grotesque." The whole mode, as embodied in dark courts and blind alleys and grim industrial canals, rings a mild if unexpected change on an ancient fascination. The Egyptians were fond of such blank, fearful rigor; during the Cinquecento Giulio Romano used it effectively, and Palladio toyed with it in his wonderful, unfinished Villa Serego, which is all massive ashlar opening up into cavernous voids. After the excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the mid-eighteenth century, the taste for vast glooms and stairs leading nowhere—for grottoes, tombs, and excavations, for viaducts, sewers, and catacombs, for derelict factories and blasted fortresses—led to a whole new architectural wave which prefigured the modern taste for strong geometrical shapes. Piranesi drew his *carceri* and his chilling *antichità*; Diderot included in his *Encyclopedia* many plates of perplexing machines in punitive-looking workshops; Ledoux designed the somber saltworks called "Salines de Chaux"; and Delafosse speculated, chalk in hand, as to how "the ideal jail" should look. That human beings must have some strange penchant for "obscurity" and "privation" was a notion to which Edmund Burke devoted considerable thought, little suspecting that the twentieth-century metropolis would become the theater of these two categories. It's hardly surprising that Atget absorbed this eighteenth-century sensibility of the visually misanthropic; after all, the so-called Egyptian Taste was being revived in his day. In so doing, however, he took the most exciting trend in pre-Revolutionary French design and made of it something all his own. What he never really succeeded in doing in his Versailles pictures—capturing the antique in the prism of the new—he brought off with aplomb in his shots of bleak courtyards in the Latin Quarter or the Bourse district. It is in reference to these strict rectilinear compositions that one can really begin to talk of an Atget who is alive to modernity.

As the photographer trains his camera on such instances of obscurity and privation as may be found within the modern city, his imagination grows. His work becomes less an act of sensibility and more a freewheeling exertion of creativity. Ragpickers' shantytowns and gypsy encampments afford material not only for documentation but for expression as well. These are peopled, even overpeopled, places; the people give focus to their surroundings. Atget's interest in the gypsies, a picturesque folk par excellence, is of course characteristic; his fascination with street types is of much the same order. In those days the street trades were usually plied by immigrants: Savoyards peddled bric-a-brac, Auvergnats purveyed spirits, Alsatian Jews hawked cheap clothes, Italians laid paving stones and mended shoes, and the Breton lilt could be heard a little everywhere, as it still can today. Many of these people were literally *paysans de Paris,* villagers and small-townsfolk from agricultural areas who had moved to the French capital to find employment. Atget himself was from Bordeaux; one of his problems during his early years as an actor had been his refusal to abandon his Bordelais twang. He was an outsider pursuing a marginal way of life that no wealthy bourgeois in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré would for a moment have regarded as a profession, much less a career. Like the hurdy-gurdy man and the little songstress whom he recorded so tenderly in a famous photo, he was an errant oddball with a box of titillating apparatus; all three would have

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been quite at home among the personnel of Apollinaire's *Alcools.* Atget's extraordinary "merchant of lampshades," a sort of walking château bristling with conical turrets, is as much a challenge to the prosaic as Rousseau's sleeping gypsy.

Atget does not meet modernity so much as he confronts it. At some point he realizes that by recording the fashion in dress—a certain purely contemporary ruche, say, or bandeau or décolleté—he can subvert modernity, squeeze it into the past. No sort of subject matter grows so rapidly old. Fads in dress go out of date so soon that to catch one in a picture is virtually to subject the present to artificial aging—as one might a cheese. In the shopwindow with its manikins Atget hits upon an especially fertile source of pictures. Patrolling the rue de Rivoli, the Boulevard du Port-Royal, and the periphery of the Bon Marché, he is dealt, over and over, the occasion for a minor masterpiece; for every time he snaps an extravagant window dressing behind a plate of reflective glass he is directing his gaze into one of the swifter rapids of the river of time. It might even be said that the unfurling ribbon of the Paris shopwindows, their surfaces aglitter with the colors of passing motorcars and kaleidoscopic with shards of sky and cloud and the slivered sheen of other windows, is his most beloved river, before even the Seine and the Marne. The collision of reflections and apparel across the surface plane is curiously aquatic, reminiscent of Monet's cloud-and-water-lily friezes. Such visual counterpoint hints at what may be the great submerged theme of Atget and other turn-of-the-century French creators: the suspension of one experience in another. The days live suspended in memory, as the past lives suspended in the stream of days. It is a matter of current and undercurrent, of direction and indirection, of what turn-of-the-century thinkers liked to call "perceived time" *(la durée).* That this theme should be elaborated within the context of fashion is of course typically—and wittily—Parisian.

The shop-front motif already had a long history. In *Gersaint's Shopsign* by Watteau, some people of fashion are shown looking over an art dealer's stock. It is anyone's guess why one lady *en tenue de ville* is portrayed inspecting her appearance in a glass presented by a shop assistant; yet the question as to what this may have to do with the purchase of pictures would give no pause whatever to your average chic Parisienne. The art dealer's pictures, she would doubtless argue, were really nothing but rococo decor; what smart young woman (or man, for that matter, for a man too is portrayed gazing at his image) would buy one for her salon without first holding up a mirror to inspect the figure that she cuts against it? This interpretation is a bit perverse, but it does serve to remind us of the delicate irony implicit in Watteau's scene—that art comes and goes, but fashion is forever. Every sea change in taste whirls about a core of personal vanity. That is why window dressings are the paramount still lifes of our civilization; they show what is to be had, and how (for a season) we shall look. Yet if Atget inherits this visual trope from Watteau and others, he also bequeathes it, much enriched, to posterity. In their own way his photos further extend the notion of the shopwindow as the shrine of a comic *beau idéal.*

An extension of a familiar theme: the same might also be said of the dozen photos of certain rouged personages that Atget took in 1921, almost all in La Villette and Versailles. The finest of these shows a *fille de joie* sitting and waiting by her doorway. Here Atget seems to have used a long lens: the woman looks compressed, in a highly modern way, by her surroundings. She also quickly dispels any idea you may have of prostitutes being feral creatures, or of prostitution itself being a preserve of wildness. This gal, tricked out in one of those vaguely nautical numbers so popular at the time, is really an accomplished fact of culture—even, one might say, of agriculture. Her sow-like embonpoint is as snug in its surround of stucco and stone as a *saucisson* is in its *croûte.* Tame as can be, she looks for all the world like a product of animal husbandry. In the end we can only smile at her transformation

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of the ritual of self-advertisement into something like the observance of a propriety.

There is a passage in Proust's novel in which the young narrator visits a prostitute in a nearby village. He is seeking to confirm his virility. No sooner does he enter her lodgings, though, when he discovers to his horror that her sitting room is chock-a-block with his aunt's old furniture, which the whore has acquired at a sale. This anecdote suggests what is likely to befall any attempt to recover, within the confines of French civilization, the savage state; one feels that Proust would have been much amused by Atget's pictures of brothels and whores. They are not the only Atget photos to put viewers in mind of his writing, however, for a general similarity has long been observed. Proust's most creative period was very nearly coeval with Atget's; their worlds to a degree coincided; both spent their later lives on one huge project; both rummaged in "lost time" and sounded the elegiac note.

The delights and the difficulties of "illustrating" the work of the faded social butterfly with that of the rough-and-ready artisan are well demonstrated in a book published some twenty years ago called *A Vision of Paris: The Photographs of Eugène Atget, The Words of Marcel Proust.* Arthur D. Trottenberg, its editor, matched charming quotations from Scott Moncrieff's translation with equally charming pictures from Berenice Abbott's collection; yet the pairing is often perverse. A passage about Louis Quinze furniture is coupled with a picture showing Louis Seize chairs; another passage, from the famous jumbo pun on the names of churches (". . . Quim*perlé* among the rivulets with which it babbled, threading their *pearls* . . ."), faces the image of a village street partially fronted by a dark chunk of Romanesque basilica, thereby showing that Proust and Atget both liked old churches. Other juxtapositions are richly suggestive, however. "From my darkened room," runs one Proust quote, "with a power of evocation equal to that of former days but capable now of evoking only pain, I felt that outside, in the heaviness of the atmosphere, the setting sun was plastering the vertical fronts of houses and churches with a tawny distemper"; and facing this passage is the photo of a house on whose surface the declining sun projects the tremulous wintry shadow of an unseen tree. It is just Proust's "power of evocation," I suspect, that really makes him seem similar to Atget. He too wishes to apprehend life through the patina, the integument of things; even more than Atget he is sensible of how much of the past seeps up into the present.

The first of Proust's architectural meditations—the "Ruskinian Pilgrimages in France"—appeared in *Le Figaro* for February 13, 1900, three weeks after the English critic's death and thirteen years before the publication of *Du Côté de chez Swann.* More articles followed. Engrossed in Ruskin's purple rhetoric, Proust journeys to Amiens, Abbeville, Dijon, Avallon; he reads Viollet-le-Duc and visits the Vézelay restoration. He is at Senlis with the Prince Bibesco, in Venice with Reynaldo Hahn; he tries to jot down, amid the same sort of scenery that Atget was beginning to record, the meanderings of his deepest thoughts. He translates into French (without knowing English!) Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*; and years afterward, when he starts his long novel, he has the rhythms of *Praeterita* still running in his head. The Latin title of Ruskin's autobiography ("things past") becomes, in a slight metamorphosis, *le temps perdu.*

Much later Proust offers a picture of his younger self on one of his "Ruskinian pilgrimages." It is in *A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs.* The novel's narrator is to catch the 1:22 from the Gare du Nord to "Balbec" to see its famous church; his grandmother will accompany him partway. He is already afflicted with his chronic ailment, and to ease his frazzled nerves ("Is *this* the enchanted voyager whom Ruskin wrote about?") he downs a few potent drinks in the bar coach. Returning to his compartment he finds his grandmother deep in the memoirs of Mme de Beausergent, and as he sits down she offers him the other book with which she

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always travels, Mme de Sévigné's letters. He reads; after a few hours he leaves his grandmother off with a friend, and reboards another night train alone. He falls asleep to the rhythm of the wheels clicking over the cross ties. At dawn, he awakens; the train is winding into a Norman hamlet nestled between two steep hills. And then he sees the girl. As the train comes to a halt she is climbing up to the station from the rushing stream below, as roseate in the light of the rising sun as a marble saint beneath a stained glass window, tall, graceful, carrying a pitcher of hot milk for the passengers' morning coffee. Everything about her is perfect; she fills him with a desire to live, whets his appetite for happiness. He calls to her, she throws him a piercing glance, but already the railway men are slamming the carriage doors; the train lurches forward.

> Whether my exaltation had been produced by this girl, or, on the contrary, had itself caused most of the pleasure that I felt at being near her, it was, in any case, so much a part of that pleasure that my desire to see her again was, above all else, the moral need not to allow this state of excitement to perish altogether—not to be separated forever from the creature who, all unknown to herself, had participated in it . . . . This beautiful girl, whom I could still make out as the train gathered speed, was like part of a life other than the one I knew, separated from it by a gap, and in which the sensations awakened by objects were no longer what I expected; and to forsake this new life now would be like dying unto myself.

The narrator did not, as we know, "die unto himself," that is, grow numb to his experiences and feelings. This passage encapsulates not real but imaginary alternatives to actual circumstances. The French prose is almost all in the subjunctive; in telling us what might or ought to have been, it catches, like a camera, a unique instant when a poetically intelligible world becomes fleetingly real or plausible. There is a way in which Proust is always folding his phrases back into themselves, like a baker kneading dough. I wouldn't care to overstress the similarity between Proust and Atget, but as I study the latter's photographs I feel, more and more, the same sort of folding taking place. In the midst of pressing home a point about the spirit of his culture, Atget begins to create a sort of pictorial space that is metaphorical in itself—a space in which the scattered elements are lovingly blended together. This coalescence creates an inner figure, or pattern, different from the objects in the picture but apprehended by degrees as their mystical sum. When Atget feels an outleap of interest toward the things he is looking at, he identifies himself with them; then it seems that his imagination is actually moving in the scene before us, disguised as a tree, or a painted lady, or a sundial in a little court. That is why his claim to a vast territory (so like Proust's annexation of a long stretch of time) was essential to his art: he shifted his position so as to shed his self, leaving it outside him in the shape of seven thousand negatives. That too is why, when he sat down one day in November of 1920, at the age of sixty-three, to pen a letter to the Minister of Fine Arts in which he asserted his rightful ownership of all that his lens had remembered for the greater glory of his city, he felt wholly at peace and assured of his entitlement: "Today this enormous artistic and documentary collection is finished; I can say that I possess all of Old Paris."

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Dave Smith's "creative writing"

by Bruce Bawer

We live in an era when the poetic act—in America, at least—is increasingly performed on assignment and negotiated in committee under the auspices of a bureaucracy. I am speaking, of course, of that unique contemporary phenomenon known as the university creative writing program. A bizarre institution, it has, in the manner of a black hole, grown more ominous and powerful with every poet, big and small, that it has swallowed up. It is a venue in which poetry is viewed, above all, as a career—a venue in which, all too frequently, the quality of the verse that a contemporary poet has written seems a far less reliable index of his relative importance than the grants and fellowships he has received, the writing colonies he has attended, the universities at which he has studied, taught, or given readings, and the number of books he has published. A poem is, after all, a fragile thing, and its intrinsic worth, or lack thereof, is a frighteningly subjective consideration; but fellowships, grants, degrees, appointments, and publication credits are objective facts. They are quantifiable; they can be listed on a résumé. Like any bureaucracy, the university creative writing program tends to be more comfortable with these kinds of concrete attainments than with artistic accomplishments whose actual value, if any, cannot be determined without the strenuous exercise of intelligent critical judgment.

Which brings us to Dave Smith, a poet highly respected in the world of the creative writing program. He might be described, indeed, as a model academic poet. He is prolific: in sixteen years he has published two books of fiction and twelve volumes of poetry, and this year alone has two new offerings—*The Roundhouse Voices: Selected and New Poems* and *Local Assays: On Contemporary American Poetry*.[1] He is a consummate university man: as the biographical squib on the jacket of *Local Assays* informs us, he "is professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond" and "previously taught in the creative writing programs at the University of Florida, the State University of New York at Binghamton, and the University of Utah." He has won numerous awards and grants: a Guggenheim, two NEA fellowships, a prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. And—ah, yes—he writes poetry.

It is, as one might expect, the sort of poetry which, in academia, currently has the greatest cachet. Indeed, as *The Roundhouse Voices* demonstrates convincingly, Smith has compiled—or, at least, at the age of forty-three, is well on his way to compiling—a body of work that is perhaps second to none in its ability to reflect the perverseness of the artistic criteria and professional

1 *The Roundhouse Voices: Selected and New Poems,* by Dave Smith; Harper & Row, 182 pages, $16.95; and *Local Assays: On Contemporary American Poetry,* by Dave Smith; University of Illinois Press, 256 pages, $19.95.

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priorities which constitute the "creative writting" sensibility.

Smith's poetry, written invariably in free verse (not a single poem in *The Roundhouse Voices* rhymes or follows a traditional form), typically consists of a gloomy, nebulous, rather burdensomely alliterative and assonant natural description, heavy with abtruse allegorical intent and often permeated by violence. In some poems an animal—a snow owl, a hawk—is at the symbolic center; in others it may be an oyster boat, a river, a pine cone, a duck pond. Sometimes the natural description is accompanied by a spotty memory from the poet's childhood or an anecdote about his own children; more often than not it yields some sort of murky epiphany or vague metaphysical speculation about passion, fear, reality and illusion, the passage of time, the triumph of death, the endurance of life. Whereas in another poet this nexus between the natural, the personal, and the cosmic might give the impression of being emotionally valid, in a typical Smith poem the connections between these elements appear to be arbitrary. The average Smith poem, indeed, seems held together not by the force of his love or distress or wonderment but by an act of will. One finds oneself imagining what would happen if one played mix-and-match with his verse—borrowing a description of a swooping hawk from the beginning of one poem, modulating into an anecdote about the poet and his father from another poem, and concluding with some epistemological musings from a third poem. Would this randomly rearranged set of words be any worse, look any more manufactured, than Smith's originals?

He has been compared to Keats, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Thomas, and (most frequently, perhaps) Robert Penn Warren—all poets of feeling, of word-music. Unlike these masters, though, Smith appears to be guided only rarely by emotion. Most of his lavishly "sensitive" evocations of nature, childhood anecdotes, and philosophical *mots,* for instance, seem to reflect little more than a desire to be clever or forceful or dramatic. Imagery, in his hands, is often an academic exercise, his personification tending toward such clichés as "the sullen sun," "the shocking gray face of the sea," "the wind softly lick[ing] the wave." His most characteristic metaphors and similes are equally mechanical; parodic of sincere emotion, they run the gamut from the confusing to the ridiculous, their main purpose clearly being not to conjure up a vivid, emotionally authentic image but to weave exotic verbal tapestries. What defensible poetic purpose is served, after all, by describing a hawk as "com[ing] out of the strange clouded horizon like the dark of whipped/phone wires"? Or saying that a sundial "spreads time on the floor/like moss in a cove"? Or that a school of bluefish are like "[d]reams/graven on cold cell walls"? Or that a spot of blood on a palm is "red as the sun's first blink/of love"? Similes such as these are ubiquitous in Smith's poetry, and his use of them, in place of straightforward description, seems little more than an unfortunate tic. Even more exasperating are those similes in which he pointlessly compares physical objects to abstractions, the effect of which is to turn potentially sharp images into cryptic ones: an old toolshed is "eternal as guilt," a plunging hawk "as shapeless as obsession," a knife "as lethal as love," an arroyo "empty as memory." Again, one feels as if one could play mix-and-match without doing any real harm—why not, for instance, a hawk "as lethal as memory," a toolshed "as empty as love"?

What's especially strange about Smith's poetry is that it manages to be inert in spite of his patent attempts to be darkly, grandly passionate. One can almost always count on his headlamps being "huge" and "malignant," his rooms being "hopeless" and "hateful," his lakes being "ancient" and "black." Sometimes, in fact, it seems as though everything in his poetry is black, from "the black body of the river" to "the black streaks/of earth," from "the black/historical fact of life's event" to a "black shadow" crawling across a face. Manifestly, Smith yearns to create a vision of life as a

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Southern Gothic nightmare in the tradition of Poe (who, like Smith, was a Virginian). This may explain why dreams, dark and silent and terrible, occur throughout his verse, from "the dark/rotting dreams of your love" to "the black slough/that the dream has warned is love's terror," from "the killing dream" and "the dream-contending world" to "desire's black whirling dream" and "dreamed moments skidding like rocks/in the silence of a Wyoming midnight." This is a poetry that is trying very, very hard—but just not making it. Smith's hyperbole, alongside that of a Poe or a Swinburne, is pale and programmatic; it fails to generate real excitement, let alone erupt into a moment's glorious music. It doesn't even give the poetry that awful-but-interesting baroque quality that one might expect it to. Most of the time, despite Smith's efforts, the poetry just lies there, flat and forgettable.

The ultimate reason for the deadness of this verse, one suspects, is that the bulk of it was born not of spiritual but of professional necessity—Smith's need, that is, to produce poems whether he actually had poems in him or not. A more gifted and versatile poet of dreams, Randall Jarrell, once complimented Robert Frost by writing: "How little Frost's poems seem performances, no matter how brilliant or magical; how little things made primarily of words, and how much things made out of lives and the world that the lives inhabit." Smith's poetry gives the opposite impression. Like so much of the "creative writing" produced in the halls of ivy, it seems to be a series of performances made less out of lives than out of words, a poetry that proceeds not along a line of feeling but, glibly and indelicately, along a chain of word associations. Words are, as a matter of fact, one of Smith's favorite themes. Time and again he talks about words *qua* words—their difficulty, their ambiguity, their limitation:

> . . . I find myself
> unable to say a simple word
> true or false . . . .
>
> We walk and find there are only a few words
> we want to say: water, root, light, and
> love . . . .
>
> Think of the verbs by which they go:
> waddle, lumber, loll,
> shudder, slide, shuffle, wander—

On the face of it, of course, there is nothing wrong with Smith's word-infatuation; after all, some poets are capable of parlaying an obsession with language into very fine poetry indeed. But Smith is not one of them. The more he concentrates on his language, it sometimes appears, the more graceless it gets.

Amazingly, there are a handful of poems in *The Roundhouse Voices* which seem to have come into being the old-fashioned way—through genuine inspiration, or at least genuine feeling—and which are therefore genuinely effective. "August, On the Rented Farm," for instance, is a lovely poem about the poet's son entering, in an abandoned barn, "the showering secret of our lives"—that is, the knowledge of death. The boy stands among the spiders and crickets, and "the light fur of something/half-eaten mats his hands." Later, father and son sit on a rotting pine log, enjoying the songs of birds. "Soon," the poem ends,

> in the yellow last light,
> we will begin again to speak
> of that light in the house
> that is not ours, that is only
> what we come to out of the fields
> in the slow-plunging knowledge
> of words trying to find a way home.

But such touching poems as this one are, in this collection, few and far between.

One turns from *The Roundhouse Voices* to *Local Assays* to find Smith, in Part I of this collection of critical prose, upholding as the paramount virtues of good verse precisely those qualities to which he seems, for the most part, indifferent in his own poetry. In a series of brief, discursive lucubrations upon

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the poetic art, this author of often obscure, convoluted, inharmonious, and trendy poems speaks up, in turn, for clarity ("In so far as a poem is a coded organization of words, it is one the poet should be trying to decode"), simplicity ("Most of the poems of my generation seem to me like contemporary furniture, more veneer than wood, less built than bolted"), meaning ("The poem must mean or it is no poem"), music ("The music of poetry *is* poetry"), and tradition (the past is "a continuously and powerfully affective force in every present moment"). He is, moreover, a strong defender of form —though not traditional form. To his mind, it appears, each poem should find its own shape, and the poet—the contemporary poet, anyway—who writes a sonnet, or villanelle, is copping out. "The artist," he intones, "follows no law other than the one he makes, though his law will be more strict, more demanding, more impossible to keep or to understand than any exterior law. The forms he creates act according to structures never acknowledged until the poem is complete." Poets who do follow exterior laws—who, that is, work in traditional forms—receive no praise in these pages; Smith (unjustly, to my mind) ridicules John Hollander and William Harmon, both formalists, as creators of "inert verse-clones." At the other end of the spectrum, he more defensibly takes to task such formal "innovators" as Charles Olson for replacing "verbal musics" with "verbal architectures."

Though one may be less than pleased by Smith's love of jargon (how can a poet who claims to revere language use a term like "verbal musics"?), one must admit that most of his observations are sound. The main problem, however, is that what he has put together here is, essentially, a collection of axioms. And though a few of them are interesting ("All poetry is . . . a retreat from unselective experience"; "Naked poetry is a contradiction in terms"), most might be described as simple, fine, true, and absolutely unsurprising ("The great poem simply tells us more, and tells it more profoundly, about what it means to be alive"). All too frequently, alas, these axioms are so simple, fine, and true that they strike one as hopelessly banal. ("Every poem comments on human experience: that is the poem's subject." The task of poetry is to "force back the borders of the unknown." "Poems do not occur organically as do lemons, worms, or uranium. [Since when is uranium organic?] Human deliberation which leads to a shaping of words, the mere intent to order, is the first step toward any poem's meaning.")

Because of Smith's inclination toward banality, reading Part I of *Local Assays* is something of a contradictory experience. On the one hand, one is pleased by the gravity with which he approaches his discussion; one tends to excuse many of his platitudes on the grounds that he is making an earnest and comprehensive attempt to map out the landscape of the *ars poetica* as he knows it—and the fact is that some areas of that landscape are more familiar, and less interesting, than others. On the other hand, though, one cannot help but be driven to distraction by his unmistakable gift, in prose as in poetry, for loquacity, abstraction, and hyperbole. All things considered, perhaps the fairest way to describe Part I of *Local Assays* is not as literary criticism but as a civilized compilation of a poet's thoughts on his craft. One is reminded of Somerset Maugham's far more accomplished book about the novelist's art, *The Summing Up*.

Part I, as it happens, represents Dave Smith the critic at his strongest. In the second and third sections of the book he offers reviews of May Swenson, Louis Simpson, James Dickey, and other contemporary poets, and his reluctance to make full use of the opportunity to deal specifically with specific texts is endlessly frustrating. As a critic, he is, as these reviews demonstrate once and for all, a maker of grand pronouncements rather than a builder of fine arguments. He speaks of Richard Hugo's occupying "the middle ground of discourse" without really explaining what he means. In one of two essay-reviews of Robert Penn Warren's poetry, he writes that

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> No poet currently living has so resolutely wrestled with or turned to advantage the problem of form as has Robert Penn Warren. He has settled upon form as dialectic, as conversation between dramatic monologue and lyric speculation. The personality of men formally created by Warren exists in the citizen of intense passion, philosophical introspection, moral violation, and ethical study. This man acts and is acted upon by nearly blind forces, yet his mission is to know those forces, to recreate them in dramas of the self. Unlike the poet who demands we make it new and theoretically casts loose from the past, Warren seeks reality in the ever-newness of the past and his attitude toward form is essentially historic. He renovates form.

What does any of this mean? What does Smith see in Warren, and not in other poets, that makes him write such a paragraph? Presumably he has something in mind here—but he refuses to offer any examples for purposes of clarification, let alone support. Reading such a passage, one has the feeling that here, as in his poetry, Smith is more interested in effect than in meaning; he wants to impress us with the tortured complexity of his thought, wants to show us how many abstractions he can keep in the air at once. (One notices, apropos of this, that what Smith admires the most in Warren—or, at least, *quotes* the most—are those windy, orotund stretches about truth, beauty, energy, reality, passion, and blackness that represent Warren at his weakest.)

When Smith is not making puzzling pronouncements about one poet, he is breezily praising another in slushy, meandering prose. His piece on Sylvia Plath, which begins as follows, is representative:

> We know her. How odd it is to say that of a poet dead nearly two decades. It is certainly not the Truth, yet we feel we know her and in important ways it is the truth to say we know her . . . . She is, almost, *the* American woman poet[!], yet she is featured in British anthologies of their poetry. No one knew Sylvia Plath less than she knew herself but *The Collected Poems* is, I think, beyond anything else the record of her struggle to know herself, which was the struggle finally to accept the self she was beyond all choosing and posturing. That is why we know her. If we do not really *know* her poetry, her prose, her letters—in the sense that one means when one has immersed oneself in another's written life, or even in the sense of the scholar who has "mastered the canon"—we continue to speak of her as if we do know her . . . . No one who invokes her name feels compelled to explain who she is. Or was. Can we really say *was* about Sylvia Plath? None of the women now writing poetry in America could have written as they have, not quite, without the example of Sylvia Plath. If they breathe poetry, they breathe that which has Plath in it . . . .

And on and on he goes, in no discernible direction. Smith is chatting away, loving every minute of it. The passage provides a perfect example of the way literature tends to be viewed in the world of the creative writing program—a world where two decades are an eternity, where the achievements of Wyatt and Surrey, say, are far less familiar than those of last year's Yale Younger Poet, where Sylvia Plath is something of a patron saint.

Plath, of course, isn't Smith's only touchstone. He is the kind of literary critic who extracts his truths from the lyrics of rock and roll songs (he reminds us: "Freedom, Janis Joplin's followers used to echo, 'is when you have nothing less to lose'"), who makes numerous references to popular television shows (he mentions *The Incredible Hulk* twice), and who, when searching for an example or an analogy, often finds it on the athletic field.

> The song of the nightingale and the bellow of the moose may cause rapture but they are not poems. They are only sounds. Dandy Don Meredith may call O. J. Simpson's broken-field dash for a touchdown an example of poetry in motion, but he is wrong. No painting, symphony, movie, or prose is, precisely and actually, a poem.

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> M. Slotznick's *Industrial Stuff* . . . might . . . be poetry by, say, Howard Cosell, convinced of its clear thinking, its cures for social and industrial dilemmas, but dazzled into speaking a nonsense that is smart-alecky.

> I am tempted to say [the poet who successfully handles the theme of adolescence] must be lucky and then to remark, as Jack Nicklaus did when told how lucky he was to sink a long putt, it is funny how constant practice makes a man lucky.

Smith takes sports very seriously. In the interview with Peter Balakian which closes the book, he remarks, in all solemnity, that "Bill Heyen wrote me once that it was odd how all the best poets are ex-jocks." This is Smith's idea of a good theory. For once, he offers several examples of something, reminding us all that Jarrell played tennis, Ransom played baseball, Keats swam. (What about Emily Dickinson? Did she skip rope in the attic?) "And speaking of Ransom," Smith goes on, "he has a wonderful line: what a poet must have in the right order is the head, the heart, and the foot . . . . It is hard to believe that anybody could argue that the grace of the body is not absolutely necessary to the grace of a poem." It is unfair to blame poor William Heyen for this nonsense, of course, for he made his observation in a personal letter, not in a published interview, and probably meant it half-seriously at best. It is impossible, however, not to blame Smith for proffering such foolishness in the guise of thoughtful literary criticism.

One can understand, though, why this particular poet would suggest such a theory. One of Smith's major concerns, as *Local Assays* makes clear, is to be recognized as a "regular guy." It is the sort of motive one might expect from a poet habituated to the ways of the contemporary academy—an academy that, at times, appears ludicrously eager to align itself with the popular culture. Characteristically, Smith makes a point of his admiration of fishermen (which is manifested in a number of his poems) and remarks that this admiration "partially reflects my suspicion of the intellectual life—as a partial life." In other words, he doesn't admire the fishermen for themselves but *wills* himself to admire them in part because they serve his purposes as an anti-intellectual. His admiration for them is contrived. (This, of course, helps to explain why, from certain angles, his very persona seems contrived—which, in turn, helps to explain why his poetry is so contrived.)

In the fourth section of *Local Assays,* Smith gets more personal. Aside from the aforementioned interview (in which the prolific Smith asserts, among other things, that the sheer bulk of a poet's work is a measure of his importance), this section contains a handful of essays derived from his experience as a poet and a teacher of creative writing. In the most interesting of these pieces—"Notes on Responsibility and the Teaching of Creative Writing"—he mounts a defense of creative writing programs. Part of his strategy in this piece, as the title suggests, is to present himself, as in Part I, as a strong believer in excellence, in high literary standards, in a responsible attitude toward the literary art as well as one's students. But his arguments in favor of creative writing programs—to the extent that he offers any arguments at all—are unconvincing.

Not too surprisingly, the essay begins with a two-and-a-half-page anecdote about an inspiring football coach of Smith's acquaintance whose "task, the task of the writer and the teacher of writing, was to help people see what they were and what they might be, not as the hypothetical average, but as individuals in the living dramatic context." As it develops, this is, in essence, Smith's principal defense of the creative writing program: it may not produce great or even good writers, but it "is one of the few formal opportunities in education for self-discovery and self-creation." What are we to make of such an argument? It is true, of course, that all art is to some degree a means of self-discovery, for its creator as well as its audience. But can a writer who

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is not good enough to enhance a reader's sense of self-discovery truly enhance his own? To put it another way, can a student with little or no gift for creative writing discover himself more profoundly by (a) entering a creative writing program and learning to write bad poems, or (b) by taking courses in literature where he will read the work of such poets as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, Keats, Browning, and Arnold? To choose (a), I think, is to view the writing of workshop poetry not as a bona fide literary act but as yet another postmodern method of life-style enhancement, like est or the Jane Fonda workout. It is, in short, to denigrate literature.

Smith's other major argument in favor of creative writing programs is equally dubious. He defends the writing workshop as an institution whose "historical pedigree . . . exists [sic] from the pre-Socratic philosophers to the Scribler Club of Swift, Pope, Gay, etc., to Ransom, Warren, Tate, and other Fugitives, to the Harlem Renaissance, to the Beats, to Black Mountain, and unto university programs in creative writing." This is, of course, ludicrous. No one can seriously compare a circle of philosophers, a school of poets, or a writer's club—an organization, that is, of professional artists or thinkers with a genuine affinity for one another's work and ideas—with the big-money, amateur-oriented business that is the university creative writing program. The writing program is descended, in truth, not from the Scriblerians and the Fugitives but from such enterprises as the Famous Writers' School of matchbook-cover fame, an operation that was founded not by artists in search of truth and beauty but by businessmen in search of profit.

To be sure, Smith makes reference to the criticisms most often leveled against creative writing programs—that they have trained a generation of poets largely unaware of poetry's traditions and possibilities, and have duped hordes of talentless students into wasting their time and money. But Smith offers very little of substance to counter these charges. Rather than confront them directly, he brands the critics who raise them as irresponsible polemicists who, "in these generally conservative times," have been seized by "a new and reactionary critical anxiety about the untidiness of the literary world." He is particularly hard on Karl Shapiro for observing in *Poetry* that in creative writing programs, "[r]eading itself is discouraged, perhaps in legacy of the destruction of libraries in the Sixties and of the Yahoo cry for Relevance. Not only is the student ignorant of craft and craftmanship: he is ignorant of literature itself." Smith's response to this is to call Shapiro a demagogue suffering from "the conservatism of aging poets." Yet in another essay in Part IV, "Passion, Possibility, and Poetry," Smith himself, in the course of outlining his workshop method, confirms Shapiro's main contention. "Most [poetry workshop] students," he says, "have read very little, have at best a rudimentary understanding of poetry, and have only in the rarest instances a vocabulary which permits the articulation and exchange of helpful criticism."

Nonetheless, after a few semesters of sitting around discussing one another's poems, these students will be graduated, given letters of recommendation, and sent on their way to other universities (which will hire them to teach writing) and to little magazines and presses (which will publish their work). It's a disturbing setup, which seems designed, more than anything else, to frustrate the fortunes of American poetry by drowning the handful of truly talented young poets in a sea of prolific, well-connected, degree-certified mediocrities. If *Local Assays* and *The Roundhouse Voices* have accomplished nothing else, they have established Dave Smith as one of the principal exponents of this new order in American poetry—a prime defender and practitioner, that is, of Poetry-as-Business, Poetry-as-Self-Exploration, and Poetry-as-Careerism. Those of us who still cling to the reactionary old habit of thinking of poetry as literature cannot but be dismayed by it all.

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Geometry lessons

by Jed Perl

"Contrasts of Form," the retrospective of seventy years of geometric abstraction currently at the Museum of Modern Art, surveys a vast territory: seven decades, one hundred and seven artists, and two continents.[1] Yet the show doesn't feel overstuffed or chaotic. The individual works reinforce and clarify one another as if in a one-artist show, and there's a start-to-finish coherence generally associated with the really well-organized overview of a single career. Only in the last section, covering the years 1960 to 1980, does one feel a drop in energy; it's like an aesthetic slowdown.

In a way, "Contrasts of Form" is about a career—the career of an idea. The Cubists and some early abstractionists banished from their art the physics of reality: the sovereignty of gravity and solid, three-dimensional form. But the artists one sees in "Contrasts of Form" went further. They rejected all that was sensuously organic: texture, chiaroscuro, the natural processes of growth and decay. In this show one encounters the first European artists to conceive an art without ties to nature. And there's something astonishingly clear and bright and *lasting* about their dreams.

Who in the nineteenth century could have imagined, considering the value artists from Courbet to Monet gave to the mutable and accidental in nature, that just after 1900 nature would begin to disappear from much of the best art? True, one can see, in the various attempts of the Post-Impressionists to stabilize nature's shifting forms, the beginnings of a move away from the cult of direct observation. And Cézanne's final Mt. St. Victoire paintings—where the translucent, green and blue world is stretched tight as a skin—seem in certain respects very close to the Mondrians of 1915 or 1920. Yet the emphasis placed by abstractionists—both in the Teens and in later years—on the idea of art as representing an alternative, better reality recalls in many respects less the attitudes of the modern West than those of the Byzantine or Medieval world. The coherence of "Contrasts of Form" echoes the seamless unity one feels in galleries full of Trecento paintings. Rather than each artist offering a particular idiosyncratic view of our world, each one points in his own way toward another world, a world which is held in common. The sharply tilted forms of the Russian Constructivists never seem to point downward, but always upward, toward the Ideal.

The atmosphere of "Contrasts of Form" is established by the first painting a visitor

1 "Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art 1910-1980" is on view at the Museum of Modern Art until January 7. The show was organized by John Elderfield, director of the Department of Drawings, and Magdalena Dabrowski, an assistant curator in the Department of Drawings. The catalogue, written by Dabrowski, was published by MOMA and includes an introduction by Mr. Elderfield; 288 pages, $45.

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sees, Malevich's *Samovar,* circa 1913. In this medium-sized but large-scaled essay in Analytic Cubism, Malevich turns away from the earthy browns and tans of Braque and Picasso, into an airier, freer place. *Samovar* has exhilarating, baby-breath-fresh blues and mauves, and sleek, new-age forms which seem to bid farewell to the Victorian baubles—the tassels and curlicues—which had hung on in Analytic Cubism. In the winged vision of this first Malevich one feels the presence of an artist who has come through the hurricane of Cubism into the miraculous, suddenly sunny time after the storm. "Contrasts of Form" is a show about a time when the clouds have cleared. Has anyone ever commented on the gentleness of early geometric abstract art? Or on the tender-hearted delicacy of so many of the Russian Constructivist watercolors? At "Contrasts of Form" one's spirits are lifted up into some rare, pure elysian realm. One is in the utopia these modernists held so dear, and one may become, at least temporarily, a true believer in this non-objective utopian world of art.

John Elderfield and Magdalena Dabrowski, who organized the show, were obviously caught up in this ecstatic feeling: the works have been brilliantly chosen and displayed almost all the way through. (It's only the contemporary artists they have trouble sorting out.) At "Contrasts of Form" the great artists—Mondrian, Malevich, Robert Delaunay, Kandinsky—look as great as ever, and the good artists—there are many, many of them—rise to the occasion: some look better than they ever have before. And even the painters who turn out to be as poor or poorer than expected gain a certain dignity from their inclusion here. They go down to defeat in a landscape of valor, and whatever self-respect they had is by their sides, intact.

"Contrasts of Form" isn't a star-system show. Mondrian and Malevich and Kandinsky are viewed here as merely the very best among equals, and in an atmosphere of utopian egalitarianism they turn out to look very comfortable. The heights from which the modern giants look down on us give the rest of the art in "Contrasts of Form" its ultimate justification: they prove that the most abstract of visions puts no limits on where an artist can go. But at "Contrasts of Form" the ensemble is the thing, and one doesn't, for the time being, give much thought to the extraordinary private journey of a Mondrian or a Kandinsky.

What exactly connects all the art in "Contrasts of Form" isn't really easy to say. The period 1910-1930 was the great age of "isms," and one encounters in the art of those years an almost unimaginable procession of supposedly discrete ideologies and attitudes: Cubism, Orphism, Rayonism, Futurism, Constructivism, Suprematism, Purism, Neo-Plasticism are all represented in "Contrasts of Form." And yet when you're in the show there's a general idea that pulls all this together; most of what you see forms a unity. In 1936, when Alfred Barr organized the pioneering show "Cubism and Abstract Art" at MOMA, he put on the catalogue dust jacket an amusing genealogical diagram of modern art, tracing developments from 1890 to 1935. He knew that two traditions ran through this period. One was expressionist, one constructivist—but Barr couldn't get much more specific. In the genealogy he has the two traditions culminating in "Geometrical Abstract Art" and "Non-Geometrical Abstract Art." In the ensuing half century the terms haven't become much more refined. The attitude which links up all the work in "Contrasts of Form" can't be described more accurately than Barr did in the catalogue of "Cubism and Abstract Art," where he spoke of "a reform movement, technological in atmosphere, self-consciously modern, aware of social problems and embracing eventually not merely painting but architecture and the practical arts within its scope."

The question of terminology is really a headache. In his introduction to the catalogue for "Contrasts of Form," John Elderfield explains that he's reluctant to use the term Constructivism to encompass all the

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art in this large show. Elderfield feels the term is too closely tied to certain historical moments: to the Russian Constructivism of the revolutionary years, and to the International Constructivism of the 1930s. I'm sympathetic to his reasoning—and yet Constructivism is perhaps the label which comes closest to catching in its net all the art in the show. When, in 1937, the sculptor Naum Gabo compiled *Circle*—a major anthology of writings and reproductions devoted to what he called the Constructivist tradition—he gave to the term Constructivism a broadness of meaning that feels right even today. Geometric, the word which appears in the subtitle of the show, is a ubiquitous and unavoidable term in relation to this art; but it also doesn't exactly always fit the case. Geometric suggests an art based on geometry, on the appreciation or study of mathematical forms and ideas, and though some of the art in "Contrasts of Form" fits this description (certain Kandinskys, all of Auguste Herbin), much or even most doesn't. Malevich and Mondrian loved rectangles and straight lines, but they didn't care about geometry (which, by the way, has as much to do with curves and waves as it does with angled forms). Any title for the show would have to feel a bit arbitrary, and Elderfield and Dabrowski have probably been wise to use a phrase, "Contrasts of Form," which while rooted in history (it's the title Léger gave to a series of pre-World War I paintings) hasn't been used as a style term before. "Contrasts of Form" is a fine title: it suggests the essential ingredients of movement, dynamism, change.

Pieces of the full picture we receive at "Contrasts of Form" have been cropping up here and there and with more and more frequency in New York in the past decade or so. The Guggenheim has done much to make familiar the range of the Russian avant-garde. In 1981, it brought us the collection of George Costakis, a Greek citizen who has lived much of his life in Russia and assembled a huge collection of Russian avant-garde art; and two years earlier the Guggenheim presented an important display of the Constructivist tradition in sculpture called "The Planar Dimension: Europe, 1912-1932." There have been retrospectives of Sophie Taeuber-Arp (at the Museum of Modern Art in 1981) and of Sonia Delaunay (organized by the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo and shown at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University in 1979). And the art of the American abstractionists of the 1930s and 1940s—who banded together to form the American Abstract Artists group in 1937—has been receiving more attention than it probably ever has before. During the past decade certain galleries, especially the Washburn Gallery, have been focusing on the work of these early abstractionists; and their pioneering explorations into the past set the stage for the important show "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944," which was organized by the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh and came to the Whitney Museum in 1984.

"Contrasts of Form" itself is a part of this history of revaluation, for it celebrates the accession into the Modern's collection of 249 works from the Riklis Collection of the McCrory Corporation. Under the guidance of Meshulam Riklis, who is chairman of McCrory's parent company, the Rapid-American Corporation, McCrory has amassed over the past fifteen years a major historical collection of Constructivist art. The extraordinary depth and quality of this collection is in large part due to the vision of its curator, Celia Ascher; and Ascher's view of the subject has obviously been enriched by all that's been going on in museums and galleries around her. Though the Modern hasn't been without Constructivist works before—in a catalogue note Ascher acknowledges a debt to Alfred Barr's pioneering curatorial example—the Riklis Collection gift makes a major addition to this area of the Modern's holdings. By showing geometric abstraction as a continuous tradition, "Contrasts of Form" suggests a lineage within twentieth-century art that hasn't received nearly enough attention at the Modern or, for that matter, in American museums in general.

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A critic who's been on the scene for many years tells me he hasn't seen a show anything like "Contrasts of Form" since "Construction and Geometry in Painting: From Malevich to Tomorrow," at the Galerie Chalette in New York in 1960. Back then the New York art scene was still small and honest enough to permit (despite the dominance of Abstract Expressionism) this other abstract tradition to be seen and, as it were, heard. And yet ever since the end of World War II the fates had been working against the "Contrasts of Form" tradition. Mondrian was revered, but tight form, which was perhaps felt to be overly cerebral, wasn't much accepted. New York's taste had, essentially, been formed in Paris, and though geometric painting was done in the French capital, geometric abstraction wasn't really the Parisian way.

Constructivism is the art that never had a home for long. It flourished in revolutionary Russia and in Bauhaus Germany, and dictators were in both cases its undoing. Mondrian and van Doesburg and Kandinsky lived at one time or another in Paris, but they were powerless against the juggernaut of Picasso, Matisse, and Surrealism. The abstractionists had their little groups, their followers, but the big name magazines like *Cahiers d'Art* didn't feature them. When Mondrian came to America in 1940 there were some who came to see him, and a few learned from him. At his death in 1944, New York already had the beginnings of a spunky, indigenous Neo-Plastic tradition, and there were significant numbers of American artists in the postwar years who were drawn to Constructivist principles. But in the expansive mood of those years, the Constructivist tradition—with its long list of "don'ts": don't abstract from reality, don't use modeled form, don't show off your virtuosity—may have felt constricting, academic. It was the extravagant spirits of Picasso, Matisse, and Surrealism which more and more engaged American eyes and minds. Postwar American abstraction was built on a desire to match Paris at its own wildly hedonistic game. And Paris—even at its most abstract, in the work of Miró and Masson—insisted on a grounding in the substance and experience of the natural world. In Clement Greenberg's seminal book, *Art & Culture,* published in 1961, modern European art is encompassed in the section called "Art in Paris."

There are many reasons why this half-hidden Constructivist tradition comes to the fore right now. There's a nostalgia today for all historical styles, and Constructivism, which is awash in antiquated forms of idealism, floats toward us like some perfect, long-lost dream. It's a fierce, revolutionary style, wrapped up in a package of the coolest, most modern design. This may explain the vogue for geometry, but "Contrasts of Form" taps deeper channels of feeling as well. There's a sense around just now that abstract painting in America has been on the wrong track for quite a while—that maybe abstraction in America lost its way a long time ago. Not only to people now in their thirties, but also to those in their fifties and sixties who were on the scene in the heyday of the Abstract Expressionists, the careers of Pollock and de Kooning and Rothko and the others don't feel entirely satisfactory. The mature work of the Abstract Expressionists too often seems to express nothing but a yearning for pictorial resolution, and this isn't the way of great art, which always expresses something beyond itself. Many of us are exhausted with the beautiful hand of postwar American art, the hand that's always thinking of its own, brilliant maneuvers. And there's something numbing about the way this aestheticism is multiplied in the washes and veils and sprays and swirls of much post-Abstract Expressionist abstraction of the 1960s and 1970s. "Contrasts of Form" offers a realm where the sensuousness of form is a function of the mind as well as of the hand. At a time when Abstract Expressionism feels increasingly arbitrary, Constructivism poses abstraction as a coherent system of value.

Yet the history of Constructivism since 1930 remains little known and largely misunderstood. John Elderfield and Magdalena

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Dabrowski have put together a show in which one feels a clear flow from the earlier years into the postwar decades, and in doing so they've made a great contribution. By demonstrating that the best of war-time and postwar work is of a piece with what came before, "Contrasts of Form" may well change a few minds and shake up some of the hierarchies.

The happiest place in the MOMA show is probably the little wall, in the 1930s-1950s section, where Elderfield and Dabrowski have hung two small paintings. At right is Mondrian's 1933 Doric-temple-pure *Composition.* At left is a painting by Burgoyne Diller, who was one of the earliest and most interesting of Mondrian's American followers. Diller (whose dates are 1906-1965) was a member of the American Abstract Artists group and, as supervisor of the Mural Division of the Federal Art Project of the WPA for the New York region, sponsored the creation of some of the first abstract murals done anywhere. Diller came to Neo-Plasticism in the Thirties, and he stayed with it, working, over the years, in a series of variations on Neo-Plasticism which he called "Themes." The painting in MOMA is an early example of the First Theme, in which rectangular planes of color float free, unrestrained by the black lines of classical-period Mondrian. Diller had studied with Hans Hofmann, and he was a figure in the Abstract Expressionist world, but he was also a dissident whose involvement with Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism was seen as rather tame in the Wild-West-show atmosphere of 1950s New York. He's always had his admirers and even his passionate advocates; but he's also been seen as one of a band of camp followers who insisted on Neo-Plasticism long after its time had passed.

At "Contrasts of Form" the eighteen-inch-square Diller is hung next to the slightly smaller Mondrian, and there's no apology or special pleading and the Diller looks, first of all, very strong, and, second of all, related but distinct. Diller doesn't create one of those little infinities which Mondrian could make out of almost nothing at all, but the Diller is a major statement, a painting with its own special color and range. Diller's hues don't have Mondrian's depth. Mondrian's rectangles, trapped within his great black lines, really grip the viewer. Diller's unrestrained forms are both shallower and more buoyant. Almost plumb in the middle of Diller's white canvas there's a bright red vertical rectangle. Its two sidekicks—one black and one yellow rectangle—bounce off to the left. The black one dives downward; the yellow rises up, to grip onto the upper corner. The composition doesn't lock up the canvas with Mondrian's Swiss-watchmaker precision; this Diller has some of Malevich's spacey freedom. If the pairing of the Diller and the Mondrian is viewed as a contest, then of course Mondrian wins (I'm sure Diller would have agreed). But the pairing feels more like a dialogue, a rich one, and, truly, each artist, in his own way, wins.

Diller isn't the only artist of the 1940-1960 period who's revealed at "Contrasts of Form" as larger, more of a part of a significant tradition than he has been seen to be by most before. One leaves the show with many resonant impressions. Ilya Bolotowsky's 1955 *Oval Painting* is more fully Neo-Plastic than Diller's in the way the composition stretches out to embrace the entire picture space; but it's also a rather rebellious work, for the primaries of Neo-Plasticism have been transformed into a triad of blue-mauve-green tones which feel gentler—off-key, elusive. In Theodore Roszak's fine, yellow and white *Pierced Circle* relief (1939) one feels an easy-flowing command of hard, mechanical forms. Roszak's work evinces the same joyous lucidity as Diller's and Bolotowsky's: these artists have obviously found happiness in geometry, as have some other Americans who worked in the 1930s and 1940s, like Gertrude Greene and Charmion von Wiegand. Greene's and von Wiegand's work doesn't exactly come off, but it's nonetheless pleasurable to look at—it glows with a sense of the plenitude of modern art. Among the European contributions to the 1930s and 1940s section, there are fine works by Jean Gorin, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and, especially,

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Auguste Herbin. Herbin is a distinct voice within the Kandinsky geometric tradition; he has his own sense of scale and commands a full, almost Post-Impressionist palette of reds and yellows and purples and blues and blacks.

One part of the story of geometric abstraction isn't told in "Contrasts of Form," and visitors to the show who are familiar with the history of abstract painting in America in the 1930s and 1940s may not be able to keep certain facts out of their heads. While Alfred Barr was an early collector and proselytizer for the European avant-garde, his lack of interest in contemporary American abstraction in the 1930s and 1940s occasioned a good deal of grief and anger among the artists. "Cubism and Abstract Art" in 1936 was a landmark exhibition, but it didn't show what was happening in America —it didn't demonstrate, so to speak, that it could happen here. In an interview with the art historian Susan Larsen, Ilya Bolotowsky recalled many years later what kind of contemporary American art was shown at the Modern then. "In 1940," Bolotowsky said, "the Modern Museum was showing—would not show us [AAA members]—but was showing the work of Eugene Speicher, a society portrait painter. And also the work of George Luks who was a very nice fellow, a retired prize fighter, and not such a bad painter for a prize fighter. But still it was all realism—second and fourth rate—and many other things. And yet, they never had any wall space for us." In 1940, AAA actually picketed the Modern, out of frustration at the exclusion of American abstraction from the 1939 "Art in Our Time" and at the sponsorship by the Modern in 1940 of shows of "Italian [Renaissance] Masters" and drawings from the newspaper *PM*. The protesters handed out a broadside called "How Modern is the Museum of Modern Art?" It was designed by Ad Reinhardt, an AAA member. Though by the early 1950s the expressionist side of American abstraction was triumphing at MOMA, the geometric artists never became especially visible inside. (A few were included in "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America" in 1951, but they were pretty much subsumed in the tidal wave of biomorphism and expressionism.)

Standing in the room at "Contrasts of Form" which contains the works by Bolotowsky, Diller, Greene, Roszak, and von Wiegand, one may feel a sadness that these artists aren't here to enjoy the view. And yet one doesn't feel depressed. These days, when all the junk of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art is being uncritically upgraded, it's encouraging to see MOMA making the right judgments about the not-so-distant past. One can only wish more of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were included. Where, after all, is Calder, who was probably at his best in the mechanical sculptures of the 1930s? Where is Jean Hélion, an abstractionist very much involved in the aesthetic battles of the 1930s and 1940s who painted some beautiful pictures in a style which synthesized elements of Mondrian and Léger? (Hélion was in "Cubism and Abstract Art" in 1936, and his work crops up in the black-and-white illustrations in the "Contrasts of Form" catalogue chronology.) Also regrettable is the absence of Joaquín Torres-García, the South American who unites in one daringly eccentric lyric style a folk-art sensibility and a Neo-Plastic sense of form.

These musings over inclusions and exclusions are perhaps inevitable in any group show, and at an exhibition as rich as "Contrasts of Form" one would like just to praise the good elements and leave the not-so-good ones alone. But as one moves forward in time, out of the 1930-1959 area and into the 1960-1980 one, it's hard not to feel that something is going very wrong at "Contrasts of Form." The final two-decade section isn't much different from the dreckathons one finds in the contemporary galleries of most museums in America. The work here isn't uniformly awful, but its general badness is the sole common denominator. This is what anybody with big bucks cruising the New York galleries in the 1960s and 1970s for geometric-feeling art would buy:

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there's a Stella, a Judd, a LeWitt, a Diebenkorn, a Mangold. This is the only section of the show that feels chosen by committee; and we're disappointed because we expect more imagination from Ascher, Dabrowski, and Elderfield. Interestingly, though, at "Contrasts of Form" this doesn't put the viewer in the depressingly confused mood such rooms generally do. Though there are a few pieces included that relate to the Constructivist tradition, this is basically a look-alike display. One can't say it represents the withering away of a tradition because the tradition is nowhere in sight. At "Contrasts of Form" by the time you get to the 1960s your vision is so sharp and your taste feels so keyed-up, you practically look right through the stuff. Coming into these last galleries you may feel like the figure of Liberty in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People.* You're so high on ideals, you barely notice the mess around you. The work here can't hold a candle to what's come before. After El Lissitzky's abstract conundrums, Al Held's spatial confusions look like rote work, and Held's deep purplish blue has to be the dullest hue in the whole exhibition.

The 1960-1980 section includes both the biggest and the emptiest works in the show, and a viewer who's taken in the first half-century of "Contrasts of Form" is probably not going to have much patience here. By the time we get to the 1960s we're very clear on what reduction means in abstraction, and we can't be bamboozled by emptiness masquerading as asceticism. Reduction—the subject of some great icons by Malevich and many great paintings by Mondrian—is but one side of the Constructivist equation. The best reductive canvases contain all complexity, just as the most complex pictures in "Contrasts of Form" seem to elaborate some simple, first principle. When you come to the thickly painted, all-white Robert Ryman *Twin* (which is probably more post-Abstract Expressionist than post-geometric anyway) or the Agnes Martin *Tree,* with all its faintly pencilled lines, there's no sense of a dialectic. The scale seems to say: "This *is* the whole world." And the surfaces—Ryman's thick strokes of paint, Martin's little lines—evince a sensitivity that barely covers up the bombast beneath. These are dead-end paint ings; they're reductions, all right, but purely *ad absurdum.*

The painting by the forty-four-year-old David Novros, which hangs in a sort of anteroom at the entrance to the show, offers the most interesting case of how Geometry 1910-1959 routs the Modern's idea of Geometry 1960-1980. Each time I've visited the show the Novros *Untitled* (1972-75) has been the first painting I've looked at, and this big, two-panel composition of rectangles banded and boxed-in by vertical and horizontal stripes has struck me as having a certain dignity about it. With its greyish blues and dark, brick-red central form, the painting conveys an air of authority—it's a respectable piece of composition. But when I've spent an hour or so at "Contrasts of Form" and come out of the show and looked at the painting again I've always wondered what it was I saw in the Novros to begin with: it now feels obvious, even pretentious. At "Contrasts of Form" a standard is established, and all too many of the recent artists in the show are incapable of coming up to it.

Though Elderfield and Dabrowski may have had it in mind to sustain the same euphoric spirit all the way through to the end of "Contrasts of Form," what the 1960-1980 section really says to viewers is: "Since the Sixties, everything has changed." The very size of the 1960s and 1970s work seems to obliterate what's come before, and from the perspective of the spacious last gallery the 1930-1959 area feels like a ghetto full of the huddled masses of traditional geometric abstraction. I don't think this 1960-1980 section had to look the way it does; it's the way it is because Elderfield and Dabrowski insisted on standing by received taste. They see Abstract Expressionism as a giant roadblock which stands between the geometric present and the Constructivist past. The artists of recent years are, we're told, as much the children of

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Pollock as of Malevich. The 1960s were a new dawn, during which the old Constructivist tradition was re-invigorated with a shot of Abstract Expressionist ideas. Elderfield describes these as including "holistic, allover structures, more purely affective color, and more expansive space." This is new medicine, and in order to convince us that the Constructivist patient needed it, Elderfield and Dabrowski have to make us believe that, by the end of the 1930-59 period, Constructivism was ailing. Dabrowski sets up this failure of health when she makes the observation that "for the generation of the 1930s geometric abstraction became a style rather than a philosophy." Perhaps she means to say that Constructivism was no longer the premier avant-garde philosophy; certainly it can be argued that Surrealism was the new kid on the block. I'm disturbed, though, by the way this development out of vanguardism is immediately seen as a shift from "philosophy" to "style"—as a failing of moral seriousness. In the show I feel nothing of the sort. For the viewer, style and philosophy can't be so easily divided. I don't see how a Popova or a Malevich is more "about" philosophy, and how a Diller or a Greene is more "about" style. Until 1960 the glow of confidence one feels in "Contrasts of Form" comes from one's sense that for these artists—whether they're good, bad, or great—style and philosophy are one.

I would be curious to know why Elderfield and Dabrowski didn't include Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) in "Contrasts of Form." It's certainly the most original contribution to the Constructivist tradition produced since 1930, and *Boogie Woogie* would have underlined at the show's chronological midpoint the Constructivist ideal of the indissoluble union of ideology and style. But perhaps Elderfield and Dabrowski didn't want anything as self-confident and fervent as *Boogie Woogie* in the later part of the show. With *Boogie Woogie* here as a point of comparison, one might have blanched at the dullsville geometric versions of what Elderfield calls "Abstract Expressionist all-overness" in the last section of the show. The story we're being fed here is that the ideological temperature has dropped—though what Elderfield and Dabrowski are really trying to do is to provide an extra-aesthetic explanation for a drop in *artistic* quality among 1960s and 1970s artists they feel they must include. The art in the last galleries is supposed to be "cool"; but it's really just stone cold.

At "Contrasts of Form" Diller, Bolotowsky, and Sonia Delaunay, who were all working in the 1960s, are shunted off to the small-scale 1930-59 galleries. They can't be in the last section because they haven't bowed down to Abstract Expressionism. And yet a big Diller or Bolotowsky would have added much to the last section of the show, and a large Sonia Delaunay would have added even more. A Delaunay could knock the socks off most of the 1970s trash. It's terrible that the only work in the show by this pioneering abstractionist, while very fine, is small and on paper. Sonia Delaunay was born in Russia in 1885 and died in Paris just six years ago, in 1979. Her career spanned the full length of "Contrasts of Form," and one of her major canvases of the 1960s, hanging toward the end of the exhibition, would have brought this memorable history of geometry to the happy, full-circle close it so richly deserved.

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Renoir in Boston

by K. S. Champa

It would be difficult to imagine a "safer" exhibition for a group of major museums to undertake than the retrospective of Renoir's work which has recently arrived at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston after major showings in London and Paris.[1] Attendance figures can only be underestimated, so the financial rewards—and the benefits to public education—can be taken for granted. Of course, this would be true for a major show of any late nineteenth-century French master, but for a variety of reasons it is *especially* true for Renoir, who holds a unique place of honor in the hearts of the lightly cultured public all over the westernized world. No other artist seems to make the looking at painting so effortlessly delightful and so unobstructed by the difficult aesthetic barriers normally raised by high art. As a maker of crowd-pleasing aesthetic confections, Renoir stands out today even when compared to the most popular composers of the late-romantic era—Tchaikovsky, Puccini, Wagner, Mahler, and Richard Strauss. Like them, he seems to have felt almost perfectly the sentimental pulse of the upper-middle-class "everyman" of a particular historical period, a pulse which he personalized with complex technical instincts and a consistent sense of the degree of narcissism and self-indulgence necessary to excite his late-century audience to ecstasies of self-satisfaction. It is Renoir's good fortune that the everyman of his contemporary audience has not changed very noticeably, in his character or values, over the last ninety years. His nostalgia for a past more delightful than the present, his cultural and political conservatism—all this remains more or less intact. Thus, his loyalty to Renoir's celebration of these things remains constant.

On the negative side, the current Renoir retrospective showing in Boston is an occasion for re-witnessing the profoundly uninteresting, half-aesthetic visual masturbations of the reactionary, lightly cultured upper-middle class—a class of which Renoir was during his lifetime very much a part. On the positive side, the exhibition provides the opportunity—an opportunity largely missed by the authors of the exhibition catalogue[2]—

1 "Renoir" will be on view at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts from October 9 through January 5, 1986. The exhibition began at the Hayward Gallery in London earlier this year (January 30, 1985-April 21), and travelled from there to the Grand Palais in Paris (May 14-September 2). It was organized by Susan Ferleger Brades, with the assistance of Jocelyn Poulton, both of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

2 *Renoir* was published by the Arts Council of Great Britain (324 pages, $19.95); it is available in hardcover from Harry N. Abrams ($29.95). The catalogue includes essays by Dr. John House of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London; Anne Distel, conservator at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris; and Sir Lawrence Gowing, Slade Professor of Art at the University of London.

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to ferret out the aesthetic authenticity of Renoir's artistic achievement when it is viewed as a whole and seen apart from the problematic aspects of his public over-accessibility.

While it has long been conventional in music criticism to argue that Wagner's or Tchaikovsky's music is *better* than it sounds, it has not been argued much of late that Renoir's painting is better than it looks. Not since the generation of Roger Fry, Willard Huntington Wright, and Dr. Barnes has much effort been directed at accounting for Renoir's massive pictorial accomplishment. Instead, it is his popularity which has been continuously studied, as though the popularity and the accomplishment were an integrated creative substance. By now there is arguably more known about the strategic details of Renoir's marketing achievement than there needs to be. It would seem that a retrospective review of his work ought to stimulate more basic critical questions concerning the profoundly original character of Renoir's masterful, if idiosyncratic, breed of modernist picture-making.

The Boston exhibition, while not the perfect Renoir representation, is a sufficiently comprehensive accounting of the artist's work in all periods of his career to encourage at least a preliminary critical re-questioning of where, if anywhere, his demonstrable greatness lies. Combining a visit to Boston with visits to the Barnes Foundation (in Merion Station, Pennsylvania) and the National Gallery in Washington (where one can see the early works from the Chester Dale collection), one has access, for a few months at least, to perhaps the broadest sampling of Renoir's work ever to be publicly displayed in proximate locations. Obviously, it would have been nice for more of the whole sample to have ended up on the walls in Boston, but for a series of somewhat tedious reasons this was impossible. If the result of the gaps in Boston is to encourage some serious pilgrimages to the other collections, the effect may not be completely negative.

What the Boston show possesses in abundance is a sense of the typological and qualitative range of Renoir's painting. True, the conclusive masterpieces of several periods of work are not to be seen in Boston, but this was true as well (although the missing pieces were different) of the Paris and London versions of the show. Some—just enough—career-cadencing masterpieces do appear in Boston, the early *Mother Anthony's Inn* from Stockholm, the *Mme. Charpentier and her Daughters* from New York, and the *Children's Afternoon at Wargemont* from Berlin, to name only three. In addition, a major group of the very best of Renoir's 1880-1885 production has been lent by the Clark Art Institute (in Williamstown, Massachusetts), a group even more extensive than that museum's loans to the European mountings of the exhibition. On balance there is, then, a sufficient number of important pictures to provide a basis for judgment, and most of what is there is well displayed. Particularly impressive is a single wall devoted to the three large "dance" panels from 1883 (two from Paris and one from Boston). A single major problem infects the Boston installation, and that has to do with the annoying changes in wall color from gallery to gallery. While the color changes do not *appear* to be major, at least one of them—the middle-value blue-green of the 1870s rooms —does markedly distort the color balance Renoir built into several very important pictures. Otherwise, the lighting for the exhibition is well handled, as is the hanging. The circulation patterns are about as conveniently arranged as they could be for processing the six or seven hundred people-per-hour crowds.

What one realizes very forcefully in the experience of "being processed through" the Renoir show is the enormous depth of the artist's painting culture. His taste in painting, past and contemporary, was as profound as it was comprehensive, and it was persistently ajar from his distressingly sentimental connection with the larger world of non-art—the world of family, friends, and society generally. Within art, Renoir was a highly refined, learned, and serious critic and practitioner. He understood Manet and

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Courbet almost uniquely well and shared from the beginning their complex feelings toward the dialectic of the old and the new in major art. He loved the form-fullness of classical painting—of Raphael, Rubens, Boucher, and (one suspects) even David. At the same time, he admired perhaps more than anything else Delacroix's translation of classical form into complexes of optically and rhythmically activated color. He respected Monet largely because of the latter's persistent "originality" (to borrow a term from Professor Richard Shiff's discussion of Monet), and he comprehended the dynamic of Cézanne's quest to "realize his sensations" as well as Cézanne himself.

Like Cézanne, Renoir seems to have felt from the beginning of his serious work as an artist that form-fullness was the constant demand of major painting and that color, developed in one or another order of intricacy, constituted the modern means for satisfying this demand. To make a painted surface pulsate with the plastic weight of Raphael and yet to modulate the pulse wherever possible with color rather than with chiaroscuro—this was Renoir's ideal from the beginning to the end of his work. No narrative, psychological, or decorative impulses ever gained much momentum in his work, any more than they did in Cézanne's, because for both artists pictorial life in painting was understood to reside in the dialectic of movement and stasis *within* coloristically elicited three-dimensional form. That form was left to operate alone without complementary pictorial space and without an organizing or directing narrative.

Renoir's literal content (his subject matter), like Cézanne's, often feels problematically separate from the content of his form. This is largely because the subject matter is aesthetically dispensable rather than integral to aesthetic construction. Were this not the case, Renoir's paintings would be ruinously invaded by the triviality of their subjects, but they almost never are. Only when eye contact between painted figures and the spectator becomes overly fixed does the content of a Renoir threaten its form in matters of expressive priority. Usually Renoir keeps the two levels of his paintings' address separate, leaving the form serious and the literal content as loose or sentimental as it wants to be. The disjuncture *is* problematic on many levels, but the quality of Renoir's painting is salvaged by his permitting this disjuncture to stand.

Thus, the audience for Renoir is provided with two routes of access to his painting. The route taken depends upon the culture of the spectator. For the less cultured viewer, the subject seems sensuously enriched by its luxurious, coloristic ambience. For the cultured viewer, the subject simply names the typology of formal arrangement that the painting begins from, or perhaps ends with. Whether Renoir intended to address two different audiences remains a partly open question, but probably neither an answerable nor a very interesting one. Ultimately, one must recognize that disjuncture of form and content was natural to Renoir. He is quintessentially himself in his paintings, at once serious aesthetically and shallow in his nonaesthetic emotion. His two audiences are, one suspects, analogues of his two selves.

Renoir could probably not have managed the many discontinuous (even contradictory) levels of taste and sensibility with which he seems to have been born without there having existed for him a powerful model. At the risk of overstatement it can be suggested that such a model *did* in fact exist for Renoir in the person of Richard Wagner. Renoir was obsessed with Wagner throughout his life. With the aid of Professor Barbara White's recent encyclopedic Renoir monograph,[3] and with some further probing of sources from the period, it is comparatively simple to chart the course of the artist's sympathies toward the composer, and toward the cause of French Wagnerism in general. To begin with, we know that Renoir was the sole member of the so-called Im-

3 *Renoir: His Life, Art, and Letters,* by Barbara Ehrlich White, was published in 1984; Harry N. Abrams, 311 pages, $75.

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pressionist generation who had some rudimentary musical training: he studied voice with Gounod as a teenager. He then became close friends with the arch-Wagnerist painter Fantin-Latour in the 1860s, while at the same time living with (on and off), and being financially subsidized by, an enthusiastic amateur of Wagner, the tragically short-lived Frédéric Bazille—himself an important painter and member of the early Impressionist group. Renoir's friendship with Fantin-Latour and many of the musicians of the nearly forbidden postwar French Wagnerist clique (Catulle-Mendes, for example) persisted during the 1870s. As postwar passions cooled, Renoir used the opportunity of his visit to Naples, in February 1882, to press for an audience with Wagner (for purposes of painting a portrait), who was finishing *Parsifal* in Palermo at the time. Renoir got his audience, did the portrait, and used a lithograph of the painting—as well as another portrait, based on an 1865 photograph—to illustrate the first postwar (and postmortem) study of Wagner in French: the 1886 monograph of Adolphe Jullien. Jullien's monograph, which featured a considerable number of lithographs on Wagnerian subjects by Fantin-Latour, also included the first publication of Renoir's reminiscences of his visit to Wagner in Palermo. Finally, we know that, in spite of painful rheumatism, Renoir attempted to "do" the Bayreuth Festival in 1896. He could not last through all of the *Ring,* but at least he made a concentrated effort at doing so. What all of this suggests is that from the time of Wagner's first radical notoriety in France (after the publication of Baudelaire's 1860 essay and, even more, after the scandal of the 1861 Paris Opera production of *Tannhäuser*) Renoir moved in Wagnerist circles more or less routinely.

The effects of Renoir's Wagnerist sympathies on his understanding of his own artistic enterprise are complex. To begin with, he confronted the radical new paintings of Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia,* at the same time that the debate over the character of Wagner's music was at its highest pitch in France, during the mid-1860s. This debate, it seems, conditioned his particular understanding of the nature of Manet's painting. Certainly, to judge by his artistic response, he saw Manet's paintings differently from any other young painter of his generation. In paintings like the *Diana Huntress* of 1866 (Washington) or the *Summer* of 1868-69 (Berlin), Renoir pressed the traditional, imagistic roots of Manet's art, overlaying these (as Manet had) with certain stylistically abrasive effects of painterly modernism—effects stressing rough contrasts of touch and tone. Yet Renoir's drawing, like Manet's, held tight to certain features of "classical" technique. Similarly, he adopted Manet's strategy of the quasi-realist paraphrase of established subjects from past art. Never in the 1860s does Renoir pursue the free, traditionless side of Manet's art. This pursuit develops instead in Monet's work, and Renoir joins it only in the 1870s, and only for a short time. His oscillations between a kind of modernist-classicism based in Manet's early 1860s work and Monet's completely self-contained modernism can perhaps best be understood as aesthetically continuous if seen against the perspective of Wagner's music. In *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* (two works composed in succession in the 1860s) a comparable polarity merges between radical chromatic procedures and conventional harmonic ones. For Wagner (and by extension, one might argue, for Renoir), modernism as a sensibility was not exclusive in its procedural commitments. Instead, it contained a balance of radical and classisistic forces interacting nervously around timeless and commonplace subject matter. The richness of Wagner's gesture, which moved beyond music to drama, where he seduced his public with approachable sentiment, and then on to effects of synesthesia, where he overwhelmed the high-culture establishment—this richness seemed to guarantee the singular importance of his aesthetic practice. The impurity *and* the fecundity of the Wagnerian gesture had in Renior one of its most willing and able adherents.

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Renoir's overt demonstrations of engagement with Wagnerist aesthetics are restricted to the 1880s. They emerge gradually in paintings like *At the Concert* (Williamstown and shown in Boston) and come to a head in the synesthetically conceived "dance" panels of 1883. In the numerous bather subjects of the mid-1880s—culminating in the *Great Bathers* of 1887 (Philadelphia)—Renoir's quest for mastery of anti-painterly construction was parallel to the enormous celebrity which Wagner was enjoying for *Meistersinger* in Brussels in 1885—a celebrity which passed literally by overnight train to Paris.

A more loosely phrased Wagnerism persists in the late 1880s and early 1890s in Renoir's extended series of paintings of women playing the piano. These paintings, several of which appear in Boston, differ from one another in their chromatic-harmonic resolution. Each possesses a particular "musical" balance of the processes of drawing and color. As a group these paintings establish the character of Renoir's late style, which critics of the period frequently understood in terms of color-music. Color-music was a medium of colored light projection activated by a keyboard; it was first devised in the mid-1890s by the English painter, Wallace Rimington.

Whether one is convinced of the absolute force of Wagner's example on Renoir's painting, the issue of a musical model in interpreting Renoir's particular achievement seems pressing nonetheless. Certainly no artist before or after made such musical pictures, which is to say pictures that achieve their finish so routinely with a graphic, coloristic cadence and nothing more. In a landscape like *Wargemont* of 1879 (Toledo and shown in Boston) or a figure piece like the *Clown* of 1909 (Paris and shown in Boston), there is an aesthetically consistent ambition to suspend colored form in a confidently abstract, self-sufficient (hence musical) way. The calls of Gautier, Baudelaire, and, finally, Pater for all arts to pursue the expressively free conditions of music fell on no ears more willing to listen than Renoir's —and on no talent better equipped to respond. In Boston, there is, then, much to "hear" as well as to see.

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Making up Jean Rhys

by Gloria G. Fromm

Jean Rhys's five novels are available for the first time in a one-volume edition, handsomely produced, with period photographs of French scenes by the expatriate Hungarian artist Brassaï.[1] Since Jean Rhys's death in 1979, an unfinished autobiography *(Smile Please)* and a selection of her letters have also appeared, plus David Plante's memoir in *Difficult Women,* based upon his brief but intense association with Jean Rhys in the mid-Seventies. She was then over eighty, no matter which of the two recorded birthdates—1890 or 1894—you accept, ill and exhausted, yet sporadically engaged in composing an account of her life, her ostensible aim being to correct all the misstatements made about her, to "get the facts down," as one of her editors put it. The trouble was, facts, dates, chronology bored and exasperated her, as David Plante learned when he tried to help her organize her material. But the descriptive details, he also learned, had to be right, for in them lay the truth about everything. Indeed, she was convinced that if you used the wrong word or image, nothing you said could be believed.

That old woman in Plante's disturbing memoir is not to be brushed away. Far too vivid in her rages as well as her helplessness, she sticks in the mind—a physical wreck sporting a broad-brimmed hat and a raffish look, the all-too-familiar drink in her shaky hand. With the same hand, she has made up her face, a thick patch of powder here, another there, lipstick as much around as on the lips. But her eyes, despite the criss-crossed penciling on the lids, are "clear and blue and strong." She knew, then, what—at eighty-five or so—she looked like? A good question, perhaps crucial. For to read the luncheon menu, she puts on glasses with such smeared lenses that Plante wonders how she can see through them.

When you know what you want to see, as well as what you want, glasses are superfluous. So, too, for the current practice of reading Jean Rhys herself through the smeared lenses of her fiction, through novels in which her own experience may have been applied cosmetically but which, at their complex heart, had little to do with the real events in her life. Put another way, as the novelty of her reappearance in old age wears off, and her characters find their places in literature's huge portrait gallery, one is more and more convinced that the woman being made up—or drawn—in the Sixties and Seventies was actually the product of her novels: ontogeny out of phylogeny.

The story of Jean Rhys's "comeback," her emergence from an obscurity that had seemed permanent, has been told many times: how, in 1949, she answered an ad in the *New Statesman* for information about her; how behind the ad lay the BBC project to dramatize *Good Morning, Midnight,* her last novel, published in 1939 and swallowed

1 *Jean Rhys: The Complete Novels,* with an introduction by Diana Athill; Norton, 574 pages, $25.

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up by the war; how the news that Jean Rhys was still alive caught the attention of Francis Wyndham, then with the publishing firm of André Deutsch; and how for the next fifteen years Wyndham and his fellow editor, Diana Athill, coaxed out of Jean Rhys the novel that brought her fame, *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Her one and only "romance," it was set where she was born, in the West Indies, but in the middle of the nineteenth century, in order to fill in the background—missing from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—for Rochester's first marriage to his mysterious Creole wife. Rhys's novel, however, was to have its own evasive ellipses.

When *Wide Sargasso Sea* finally appeared in 1966 and won two literary prizes, the creation of Jean Rhys by her new audience was already underway. During the years of struggle to finish a book not only different from any other she had ever written but also much more difficult than anticipated, she was the object of a form of attention both new to her and problematic. The actress who had orchestrated the BBC dramatization expected gratitude and made requests that verged on demands, throwing Jean Rhys into fits of panic and anger. The editors waiting for her novel provided invaluable encouragement but also filled her with anxiety and guilt. Against her principles, in order to justify the lengthening delay, she tried to explain what she was trying to do, attempts—given her acknowledged "lack of method"—that only succeeded in making her miserable. And not least, chronically tight-lipped about her personal life and past, she had to make known a sick husband in trouble with the law. The ingredients were all there for the preferred portrait of her—the perfectionist, the heroine, the martyr, the victim, the outsider, the underdog. So that with the re-publication in the late Sixties of her earlier novels—fictions not only strongly autobiographical in their settings and flavor but also seeming to tell a continuous story, which surely led up to the "madwoman in the attic"?—the die was cast and the critics could produce the Jean Rhys they liked best.

The order of the novels in the current edition bears out this scenario. *Voyage in the Dark* comes first, even though it was published third. Its position here is not so much —as the editor argues—because Jean Rhys had drafted it in rough form early on and then revised it after *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie,* but mainly because it allows for a narrative sequence. Until Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* is the youngest heroine, her situation corresponding to the plight Jean Rhys found herself in when she first went to London from Dominica, a teen-aged "loner," and met the older man who introduced her to sex and English gentility and then grew tired of the burden she had become. *Quartet,* published as *Postures* in 1928, follows naturally, picking up the young woman (named Marya Zelli this time) in Paris in the early Twenties, her husband a shadowy art dealer who lands in prison, thus forcing her into the hands of a *woman-dealer* named Heidler, who is reminiscent of Ford Madox Ford but hardly a portrait of him. (The notion that Heidler was Ford and that she, like Marya, had fallen in love with him shook Jean Rhys to the core.) With *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930), the "tale" continues to unfold, the already shopworn woman (now Julia Martin) down and out in Paris and London—before Orwell—but pretending, without great success, that she has a future consisting of more than just one farewell after another. In *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), the middle-aged and desperate Sasha Jansen concludes the saga of the luckless Rhys character adrift in a hostile world, a world of cheap hotels and "cafés where they like [her] and cafés where they don't," above all, a world in which the present is infected by memories of the past. It all works so well: how could this not add up to the history of Jean Rhys's emotional life, especially when you cap it with the story of a young Creole woman driven mad by an uncomprehending Englishman?

Tempting as it is not to take Jean Rhys's protests seriously and to disregard the con-

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tradictory evidence, the novels make their own plea for an impersonal judgment upon them, divorced from autobiography. *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* are flawed fictions, the work of a writer who had not yet learned how to control point of view or to dramatize sensibility. They rely heavily on direct statements of feeling instead of drama, even on uncharacteristic chapter titles in *Mackenzie,* and on all-too-obvious symbolism imported from the Nineties. The result of Rhys's awkwardness as well as her disconcerting shifts of focus is that the consciousness at the center of these early novels becomes diluted and unconvincing. But by the time she was ready to revise her earliest manuscript—the record that may well have been a faithful account of her first unhappy love affair in England—she had mastered the art of the internal monologue and discovered how to alternate it with dramatic narrative. *Voyage in the Dark,* published in 1934, was Jean Rhys's first genuinely accomplished novel—and she knew it. That was why she bitterly resented and resisted her publisher's request for a different, less harsh final paragraph, one that would allow the reader to think Anna Morgan might survive the bungled abortion (which had, by the way, no factual basis in the author's life). In the end, Rhys made the change—and years later condemned herself for it.

The development she cared about—from the clumsy *Quartet* (that had followed close upon the Left Bank stories praised by Ford) to the near-perfect *Voyage in the Dark*—is only obscured and trivialized by the placement of her third novel first in this edition. Moreover, the extraordinary achievement that followed with *Good Morning, Midnight* loses some of its force when the continuum emphasized is the dubiously autobiographical one. For this remarkable novel is Jean Rhys's finished form of the experimental fiction she grew up with in Paris, fiction that began in the late Eighties with Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés.* Hailed years later by Joyce for its *monologue intérieur, Les Lauriers* is echoed in *Quartet* and subtly parodied in *Good Morning, Midnight.* Daniel Prince, Dujardin's philosopher-dandy, primed and perfumed in an equally redolent Paris, anticipating a night at last with the actress he feels he has earned, seems an absurdly self-conscious forerunner of the existentialist Sasha, for whom everything touched turns to dust. Prince's quest, whatever its outcome, is the time-honored serious one of the male for the female; Sasha's self-lacerating odyssey from hotel room to café and back again has the comically astringent flavor of a woman with "such a cafard!" trying to hold nothing together. In *Good Morning, Midnight,* Rhys proved herself the equal of any of the modernists, creating musical fragments, whole in themselves, out of her own special brand of shame and failure. Yet Rhys's art has been valued less than its raw materials.

What makes her life story sad is the neglect at the heart of the attention she has gotten since *Wide Sargasso Sea.* There is tribute paid, of course, to her temperament and her style, but the harrowing of the woman counts for more than anything else. No one has thought to connect the ordeals of her fictional characters with the element *missing* in all of them: none has the soul of an artist, despite the uncommon sensibility of an Anna Morgan, a Sasha Jansen, or the Creole Antoinette. In other words, if writing was indeed "therapy" for Jean Rhys, perhaps it consisted of imagining what would have happened to her without the saving grace of her gift. The dreadful possibilities must have haunted and obsessed her. They probably explain her fondness for George Moore's *Esther Waters,* a novel she read and re-read, in which the religion imbibed in childhood finally provides a lifeline after years of sexual misfortune; and they surely lie behind her most brilliant character creation, Sasha Jansen, who, more than any of the others, has the "je ne sais quoi" of the true original—but without the slightest drive or ambition. *She* is beaten, too, of course, for Rhys's allegory cannot have it otherwise. What, after all, does the return—in *Wide Sargasso Sea*—to the West Indies of Rhys's birth signify, if not one more demonstration of what

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might have happened to the girl who stayed at home in Dominica just a little too long, who had her life—like Antoinette's—arranged for her, and who then found herself with neither defenses nor allies? Jean Rhys thanked God that she had managed to go her own way and do her own bungling, finding out in the process where her own sanity lay—not in West Indies Obeah but in the magic of craft.

It is all very well for her supporters to point out the ways in which Jean Rhys's characters and situations (monochromatic as they are) touch upon the social and political issues that dominated the Sixties and Seventies: class, race, gender, colonialism. Her fiction—like most—does have content, but it lacks ideas, and its themes are sound patterns of feeling rather than intellectual formulations. Jean Rhys knew this about her novels. She knew, too, what people wanted from them—verification, corroboration, weapons for war against the "other"—and she tried not to give in. But once a novel was published, she no longer felt attached or responsible, unless it were made the basis for an inaccuracy about *her*. Perhaps she hated most the labeling that went along with such narrow views of literature and life—the penny-in-the-slot syndrome. As she put it in a letter of 1963, "There is *no* penny for the slots. Not for writing or the black versus white question—the *lies* that are told—or for anything that matters. Only for lies. Yet everybody believes in the nonexistent penny and the invisible slot. So what to do?"

She certainly had her priorities, and no one understood better than she that they were tied up with self-expression and self-gratification, sought almost exclusively through the act of writing, no matter what some of her partisan readers claim.

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"Ultimate poem"
by Herbert Morris

One takes the dark valise that one has taken
on specific occasions before this
when there were voyages to be embarked on.

What recommends it is, simply, its size:
small enough to hold just what it should hold,
just what one wishes, or needs, it to hold.

The morning of departure, but not sooner
(readiness plays no part: one can be said
to be as ready to leave as not ready),

one places in it (fever slowly mounting
as one handles each object) the essentials:
soap, a small towel, pencils, paper, swimtrunks.

One's hopes run high. Flushed with anticipation
of distance, distances, drunk with the prospect
of whatever may still be possible

in one's life, south of here, the fierce, bleached splendor
of exploration, sensing how light pours there,
how the surf breaks there, how the dark comes down,

one is nevertheless visibly cautious
not to betray, too much, too soon, too deeply,
the precise nature (word, or glance, or gesture)

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of what it is to be possessed by that,
gripped by the sum of the still-undisclosed.
(What is the word with which one translates fever?)

Nor need that coast be named yet in this poem,
though it may be enough, more than enough,
to know its syllables lie drenched with music,

music more intimate, perhaps, or darker,
more moving, left to one's imagination.
One travels south, far south. There is a beach

(rather, mile upon mile of dazzling beaches),
a long strand sweeping out from where one stands,
from wherever one stands, in all directions.

One arrives, of course, without reservations
at a hotel neither crumbling nor grand.
It may be better not to be expected

nor, when asked, to give one's name at the desk,
never to say where one has been before this
nor to reveal where one may venture next.

Be vague, elusive, abstract, noncommittal:
I may just stay, you say, indefinitely,
or: I have not decided what my plans are.

A boy who may be named Fernando shows you
your room, takes your valise (You travel light),
opens the terrace door, waits for your tip.

You thank him. When he leaves, you look about you.
Not finding what you want, you call the desk:
Could you provide a table, nothing large,

I might keep on the balcony to write on?
And could these curtains (sheer, white muslin curtains,
if there are curtains) be stripped from the windows?

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I want to have whatever light comes down,
whatever darkness, for that matter, too.
A boy who may be named Emilio enters

at six, bearing a table on his back,
a small, square, wooden table, its four legs
listing to starboard when he sets it down.

You want to write on this? he asks. I nod.
I thought I'd write while looking out to sea.
He moves the table to the balcony.

Like this? he asks. Like that, I say, and thank him.
You want the curtains down? he asks. Yes, please.
He makes the tour, one window, then the next,

standing on a chair carefully removes
one sheer, white muslin curtain, then another,
if there are curtains, holds them to the light,

where they dangle and sway from his bare arm.
You don't like curtains? he asks. I want light,
more light; I want as much as I can have.

(This is enough for a boy sent upstairs
on a mission having to do with curtains,
with light, more light, with small, crude, wooden tables,

enough for a boy who may, or may not,
be named Diego. One nods, smiles, says Thank you,
explaining nothing, all the while, nothing, nothing.)

I place a book beneath one buckled leg,
a cigarette pack, ancient, musty, found
in the bureau drawer, beneath another.

I rock it back and forth. It hardly moves now.
I undress, store my clothes. Light pours, light pours.
I change into the swimtrunks I have brought.

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Arrayed in scales of green-gold, iridescent,
a baby lizard strolls across one wall
for a glimpse of Room 201's new guest,

closing and opening its armored lids
with some momentous effort (one should look
wisely, judiciously, or not at all).

From the valise, propped high on the low bed,
I take the pencils first, immensely yellow,
lacquered finishes blazing in the sun,

in ascending order, shortest to tallest,
according to length line them on the table,
their points flawless, immaculate, black, gleaming.

Then I remove the paper I have brought,
blindingly white, crisp, unlined, neither weighted
nor flimsy, unbound sheets which seem almost

eager to rise to take whatever mark
one might be called upon to draw across them
(the word for light, perhaps, the word for evening).

I sit now at the table, feel the heat
settle like birds, great birds, on both my shoulders,
one on each, see a swimmer take the breakers

as opulently as the sea takes light.
Soon the dark will have changed the sky to water,
or the water to sky, it hardly matters.

Wild bougainvillea rattles the bright shutters.
One's eye travels to the first of the pencils.
I touch it, grip it tenderly, begin.

This is the poem one has come to write,
the poem one thinks of as ultimate.
This is the music, this, one had in mind.

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Music

Eastward the course of (Western) music

by Samuel Lipman

Were one to listen to today's received intellectual opinion in music, one might very well think that the West was in the process of becoming a musical colony of the East. We have heard *ad nauseam* of the influence of the Orient on such avatars of the mainstream avant-garde as Philip Glass and Steve Reich; California composers have often shown every sign of looking across the Pacific rather than across their own continent for musical and (especially) philosophical tutelage. Since the 1960s, there has been a vogue among avant-garde musicians for Oriental chanting as a cure for the aesthetic and social debilities of Western life. Even such a respected Western musical figure as Yehudi Menuhin went through a phase (again, not surprisingly, in the 1960s) of joint quasi-Indian musical ventures with sitarist Ravi Shankar. And in the early part of the current New York season, we have seen Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic devote their first five concerts to a mélange of Western and Indian music, the latter including the Sitar Concerto No. 1 of Ravi Shankar and the world premiere of the Fantasy on Vedic Chants for Indian Violin and Orchestra by L. Subramaniam.

But it would be a mistake to accept received opinion in this area. In fact the major influences in music have not gone, and are not now going, from East to West, but rather from West to East. Our classical music tradition—the achievement which runs from Bach and before through the Romantic era into modernism and even includes the more substantial components of the avant-garde—has been, and continues to be, an almost overwhelming influence in those enormous areas of the Orient which either have developed economically or are now in the process of such development.

Though such a statement will undoubtedly be called chauvinistic, the evidence for its truth is to be found everywhere. South Korea is a hotbed of aspiring young pianists and string players; the South Korean piano manufacturing industry is now a major factor in world instrument sales. The People's Republic of China is deeply interested in Western music, and Chinese musicians and students are coming in increased numbers to the West to study. At the same time, Western artists and teachers are in great demand for extended visits to China. And most important, of course, is the overwhelming popularity of Western music in Japan, where every index—whether in education, sales of instruments and printed music, sales and availability of records, or performances by Japanese and foreign artists—shows our art to be increasingly successful.

Here in the United States, too, it is not difficult to see the interest musicians from across the Pacific have in Western music. The number of Oriental musicians, both student and professional, studying or employed in our country grows every year. Major careers in the West are now being made by such musicians as Yo-Yo Ma and

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the three members of the Chung family, violinist Kyung-Wha, cellist Myung-Wha, and conductor Myung-Whun. The last two Queen Elizabeth contests for violinists in Brussels have been won by Oriental violinists playing, it goes without saying, Western music. It must be stressed, too, that American orchestras all over the land are benefiting from the availability of excellent players, excellently trained, from the East; every music teacher knows that his Oriental students are usually at or near the top of his class in talent, intelligence, and dedication.

A concert on public television at the end of October provided a welcome (if perhaps not fully intended) example of the present flourishing across the seas of our Western musical life. The NHK Symphony Orchestra of Japan—in fact the orchestra of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation—came to New York to play a concert in the Great Performers series at Avery Fisher Hall, and then, several days later, on October 26, to give the United Nations Day Concert in the General Assembly Hall of the UN. The Fisher Hall concert included three works: composer Hidemarō Konoye's *Etenraku,* the Dvořák Cello Concerto (with Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi as soloist), and the Seventh Symphony of Beethoven. As reviewer Tim Page pointed out in *The New York Times,* only the Japanese work was unfamiliar; the Dvořák and the Beethoven are staples of our concert repertory. He might have added, too, that the Beethoven symphony is a central monument of our Western musical greatness. *Etenraku* was retained on the orchestra's program at the United Nations, as was the Beethoven. But the Dvořák was replaced by another monument of our own tradition, the Bach Concerto in D minor for two violins, which was performed by Yehudi Menuhin and his sixteen-year-old Chinese student, Jin Li. Menuhin also served as conductor in the Bach, while the Konoye and the Beethoven were led by the orchestra's regular conductor, Yuzo Toyama.

The televised concert, ninety minutes in length, began with a commercial for the UN spoken by Menuhin, quickly giving a bit of history of the organization's founding in 1945 (including interesting shots of the opening conference in San Francisco) and reading from the doubtless well-meaning words of the UN Charter.

After a quick credit line to the sponsor, making clear that the motivation was wholly political rather than at least partially musical—"This broadcast of the United Nations Day Concert is made possible by a grant from IBM, in the interests of international peace, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations"—the music began. The first piece—accompanied by shots of world leaders and advertisements for the UN's good works, ranging from education to health—was the *Hymn to the United Nations* by Pablo Casals. This work, orchestrated as if by Brahms, begins with a melodic phrase seemingly copied from the Doxology and usually sung to the words "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow"; the work as a whole is a pungent example of the great cellist's curious sentimentality and lack of taste as a composer, and it received an oddly clumsy and not-together performance from the NHK Orchestra and its conductor Toyama.

The real music-making of the evening began with the Bach Concerto. Menuhin's own association with this masterpiece has been long and close, going back on phonograph recordings to a marvelous 1932 collaboration with violinist Georges Enescu and conductor Pierre Monteux.[1] From the first solo entrances of the violins, it was clear that this was to be a serious performance. Menuhin's playing, while hardly mellifluous or sensually enticing, was sturdy, straightforward, and patrician in phrasing. He was matched by his protégé, whose approach seemed honorably modeled on that of his master. The tempos in the two outer movements were brisk, and the melodic lines were played with none of the offensive swooping

1 Available some years ago, along with other documents of Menuhin's early greatness as a violinist, as an EMI import, RLS 718.

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and milking of the obvious beauties so characteristic of today's superstars.[2] The profoundly moving slow movement was set out as a kind of lesson in how great music can be played simply and proudly, without any attempt to do more with the music than to play it as it is, rather than, as is fashionable now, to make every note and turn of phrase "meaningful." The stage deportment of both soloists, too, was wonderfully serious, with none of the mugging and grimacing *de rigueur* on the performances PBS regularly televises these days. It must be said that the orchestra, comprised for the Bach of just a few strings, was not always internally together; it must also be said that to hear such properly high-minded playing from the soloists cannot have been other than a unique experience for the orchestra players lucky enough to have been onstage for the performance.

As if to drive the point home, Menuhin, as is his wont, played an encore, the Prelude from the Bach E major Partita for solo violin. It cannot be pretended that Menuhin's bow arm is in the best shape; it has not been so for many decades. But though the fact is easily forgotten nowadays, there are more important things in violin-playing than an easy bow technique; there is musical command, integrity, and controlled passion. These strengths Menuhin possesses as few violinists playing today do, and the result in the Bach Prelude was that he showed his listeners, as he had in the Concerto, how the piece should sound—not as a manifestation of his platform manner, not as a sign of how happy he was enjoying his great career, but as a direct manifestation of the music's structure and shape. This may not have been a winning demonstration of great violin-playing, but it was a powerfully convincing demonstration of the music itself.

2 For an example of just such a "modern" approach to what can only be called fiddling, the interested reader should hear the performance of the Bach Concerto by Itzhak Perlman and Isaac Stern, with Zubin Mehta conducting the New York Philharmonic, on CBS M 37244.

After short, formal remarks from Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, the NHK Orchestra, once more under the baton of Toyama, played *Etenraku* ("Coming from Heaven"), the sole Japanese work on the program. *Etenraku* is an orchestral version, on modern instruments, of a ninth-century melody used as music for the Imperial Court. This composition was written by Hidemarō Konoye (1898-1973), a student of the French composer Vincent d'Indy. Not surprisingly, *Etenraku* presented the paradoxical combination of a repetitive melody played in a non-Western pitch system, punctuated by traditional Japanese drums and accompanied by Western instruments playing very solidly in the key of E minor. The result—at least in mood—seemed fairly close to such pseudo-Orientalisms as were fashionable in late nineteenth-century Europe. But unlike the music of (for example) Rimsky-Korsakov, which belongs fully to the Western musical tradition, the Konoye (greatly admired, it must be stated, by *The New York Times*'s Tim Page) impressed at least me as falling uncomfortably between two stools, being neither authentic enough to present a convincing picture of Japanese music and culture nor Western enough to seem a foreigner's powerful impression of an unfamiliar and captivating art.

Yehudi Menuhin has always managed to combine aristocratic music-making with mawkish and sentimental political positions remarkable even for a celebrity artist. This television program was no exception to the rule of the violinist's last forty years. He now gave a particularly naïve homily on the twin subjects of his own participation in United Nations celebrations in the past and the need for world peace and the protection of the earth's "flora and fauna." In the usual devil-take-the-hindmost fashion of public television, Menuhin's sentiments were closely followed by a commercial for a British mystery series and other forthcoming programs; it seems clear that no one these days at Channel Thirteen in New York actually

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takes into consideration the effect on a serious audience of all that goes out over the station's airwaves.

And so it was time for the Beethoven Seventh. The NHK Orchestra's performance was unadorned, tonally dry, and even a bit careful. Toyama's conception resembled neither Wilhelm Furtwängler's *Weltschmerz*-laden tribute to the romantic gods nor Arturo Toscanini's taut and driven delineation of a black-and-white Beethoven. And, in truth, the NHK Orchestra is hardly today's elegant Berlin Philharmonic; neither does it remind the listener of yesterday's plushly cushioned Philadelphia Orchestra. What was remarkable about the NHK Orchestra's performance of the Beethoven Seventh was not that they played it better than some other orchestras do, or that the orchestra's conductor presented an individually compelling reading of the symphony. More important—or, given today's falsely glittering cult of hollow performing personalities, much more important—was the fact that the Japanese orchestra (and, I might add, Humphrey Burton, the television director responsible for what was shown on the screen) took Beethoven seriously because of what they could do for Beethoven, not what Beethoven could do for them. To watch conductor and orchestra at work was to witness dedicated musicians concerned to proclaim Beethoven plain, to make clear *his* musical design, *his* formal structure, and *his* aesthetic purpose. The result was that the symphony was allowed to build its climaxes musically rather than rhetorically. For once the closing bars of the concluding *Allegro con brio* seemed the apodictic climax of the intellectual process which had begun many minutes before with the determined yet plaintive opening *Poco sostenuto.* In between these giant beginning and ending markers, whether in the contrapuntal string writing of the *Allegretto* movement or in the demonic *Presto,* one was never conscious of mere gesture and manner, but only of carefully limned purpose.

To accomplish their ends, the NHK Orchestra clearly displayed many solid virtues: excellent strings, reliable brass, and precise although not always smooth-sounding winds. Toyama, conducting from memory, was never less than clear and sensible in his motions; completely missing, fortunately, was the sartorial and balletic self-display so common with the conductors usually seen on television. The highest compliment that can be given orchestra and conductor is both fundamental and simple: they played Beethoven, and Beethoven won.

And so did we Western music lovers. Here, in a rather short television concert, presented in a political atmosphere at best dubious and at worst corrupt, was a true sign that the power of the greatest Western music to compel attention and participation is not yet dead; that a world in its origins thought to be alien to such particular achievements of Western civilization as Bach and Beethoven can pay them the respect of the deepest and most serious involvement; that the West is in fact seen outside its borders as the purveyor of beauty and greatness. We of craven hearts and guilt-ridden minds were done a favor at the end of October by the NHK Orchestra, and we are the better for their having come to our shores.

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Dance

The New Theatricality

by Jacqueline Coleman

Avant-garde dance of the 1960s and 1970s changed the way we look at dance, as well as our idea of what the art of dance could and should be. The new choreographers of those years—postmodernists (as they came to be called) like Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, and Twyla Tharp—created dances based on the conviction that dance should consist of nothing but movement, and that movement should be its only subject. They discarded as superfluous distractions the proscenium stage, dancing to music, costumes, sets, stories, romance, traditional drama, virtuosity, and pre-existing vocabularies of steps. Their dances took place in unusual spaces—lofts, roof tops, parking lots, museums, and fields—and were composed of nonsystematized, nonrepresentational movement that focused on parts of the body little used in traditional dance, and a restricted number of steps that were newly invented. The postmodernists of the Sixties and Seventies thus created a mode of pure or formalist dance that was recognized as a distinctly new contribution.

Today, however, in the revisionist Eighties, a new generation of postmodernists like Tim Miller and Margaret Jenkins, and even some of the founding postmodernists themselves, are abandoning pure or formalist dance and reclaiming all that they once discarded. Accordingly, postmodern dance works are nowadays likely to be staged in opera houses and theaters, and are laden with sets, speech, film, video, painting, sculpture, sex, stories of the choreographers' lives, analyses of the world's problems, fashion-designer costumes, scores, soundtracks, and assorted objects from real life—sometimes all within the same production. Called collaborations, performance art, or dance theater, these new genres aspire to extend dance's subject matter and return avant-garde dance to the theater, or at least dress up the casual Sixties and Seventies postmodern movements largely retained by all three. Dance of this sort now ends up being about everything but dance, and, ironically, is in the process of restoring its old nemesis, theatricality.

As a consequence of this change, postmodernist dance is finding itself oddly popular for an "alternative" art form. For the first time, *Vogue, Vanity Fair, The New York Times, People,* educational and cable television, the National Endowment for the Arts, classy foundations, staid corporations, and packed crowds are all taking a special interest in it. The New Theatricality, as it has been called, is a box-office success—something that could never be said of postmodernist dance in the Sixties.

But to what extent can such decorative, theatricalized dance be considered an artistic success? Can Sixties and Seventies postmodern movement really absorb so many non-dance elements? Can it sustain itself in a large theatrical stage space? What happens to dance when it is used to convey

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messages of a more literary nature? And can dance of this kind truthfully be considered an advance? These were among the many questions posed by the Trisha Brown Company, a seminal postmodern group dating from the Sixties, when they performed for the first time at the City Center Theater in September.

Like other creators of Sixties postmodern dance, Trisha Brown started her brilliant career in the abandoned warehouses of downtown Manhattan. Her primary objective then was to extend the boundaries of pure dance. Sally Banes has deftly described how, in a work called *Clothes Pipe, The Floor of the Forest, and Other Miracles, Dance for a Dirty Room, Everybody's Grandmother's Bed, the Costume, Adam Says Checkered Sea*—the very title evokes another era now—Brown produced odd original motions by having dancers dress and undress their way through items of clothing threaded on a grid of horizontal ropes suspended above a loft audience. Her admirers were a small group of local artists whose freewheeling, bohemian culture really did run counter to everyone else's. What a difference a generation makes. On opening night at her City Center season, a houseful of distinguished silver-haired patrons respectfully applauded a program consisting largely of Brown's collaborations with visual and musical artists, her latest and most extravagant interest.

The well-known Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd painted astonishingly beautiful cloth backdrops in vivid blue, green, and purple touched with a single black brushstroke for Brown's *Son of Gone Fishin'* (1981). During the course of this dance, one colored portion of Judd's backdrop moves either one-third, two-thirds, or completely over another, thereby creating a series of pictorial images which look like Jules Olitski's paintings of the Sixties, many times their original size, come to life. Dressed in a similar blue, the dancers form a fixed jumble that moves laterally from one side of the stage to the other. The entire effect is stunning, but the dancers and the dancing are reduced to serving as elements of the "brushwork" on Judd's "canvas," which itself is the real focus of interest. What is disturbing is the diminution of dance's role within its own art.

Indeed, over the course of time, the dance components in Brown's collaborations progressively lose ever more ground to the nondance elements. *Set and Reset* (1983), for example, assaults all the senses in much the way a disco does. The curtain opens on nothing but Robert Rauschenberg's rectangular cube and pyramid constructions, the sides of which display a continuous stream of newsreels and emit a continuous stream of garbled sounds. The stage is darkened, and as the things rise from the floor to the top third of the stage, the spectator is made to feel awestruck, as if he were witnessing the monolith from the film *2001*.

In this work Brown makes her entrance by being carried, supine, along the rear wall of the stage into a side wing—her favorite part of a large stage—which is exposed so that the audience can still see her "offstage." Then a tape starts rocking the joint with Laurie Anderson's electronic rock piece, "Long Time No See." When Brown and her company repeat their false exits and snake sinuously in hieroglyphic-like profile, her visible/invisible and Egyptian themes become clear. But if and how the two ideas relate to each other remains murky. Is Brown impersonating an ancient Egyptian mummy come back to life in a disco?

This is only one of the problems in this piece. The audience seeing *Set and Reset* for the first time usually can't tear its eyes from Rauschenberg's technological marvels long enough to look at the dance. This observer was also distracted by Anderson's music. Brown's sketchy stop-and-start movements look pretty thin. One found oneself wishing that Brown would stop interrupting her phrases and gather more momentum of her own.

No such expansion is possible in *Lateral Pass* (1985), Brown's most decorative collaboration to date. Here the choreography is confined to a narrow corridor of space at center stage—after Nancy Graves's painted

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sculptures have descended into it. Amid the elements of what looks like a Graves painting come to life—huge colored shapes and outlines of shapes rendered, of course, in 3-D and suspended in the air by invisible ropes—Brown's dance can't and doesn't do very much. Bodies bump together amorphously, twist in place, and occasionally uncurl into a flat arabesque, face and hands down, forming a 180° angle straight across (*Lateral Pass,* remember?). But even this, the clearest gesture in the piece, doesn't bear much relation to the other moves. It is, in any case, a throwback to Merce Cunningham, who has for years used a pose like this to much better effect.

Meanwhile, the beat of Peter Zummo's commissioned score is just infectious enough to make you want to move to it. But in keeping with the old postmodern caveat that you don't let the music tie you down, Brown pays little attention to it, and her choreography is somewhat adrift, trapped within Graves's sculpture and an outdated imperative that no longer applies to her new work.

Lateral Pass does have one successful section that actually contains a new movement idea. On a plain black stage in small pools of colored light, dancers roll around each other, except for one who is attached to a rope running up to the ceiling. When this dancer rolls over somebody's back or does other steps that would normally end with gravity returning him to earth, the rope is pulled and he completes his step, hilariously, in midair. But Brown is no longer interested in purely formal ideas like reverse gravity or weightlessness, and she rushes on to the main segment, in which Graves's multiple constructions dominate everything else.

In terms of the attention it received, Trisha Brown's City Center season clearly marks the crest of her career. But in terms of artistic achievement, the painting, sculpture, and photography she has invited into her new dances tend to hurt the choreography, as is often the case when discrete artworks are substituted for sets and costumes designed simply to serve it. Visual art, particularly when it is outsize, tends to overpower or distract from the human body. It elevates understated postmodern movement beyond its true importance. Moreover, the use of mixed media turns the stage into a three-ring circus. Choreographers often end up playing to or with non-dance elements, when what they really need to be doing is devising bigger, more dynamic, more complex choreography better suited to their big new environment, the concert hall, and to the new music they have commissioned for it. Collaboration, for many postmodern choreographers, seems to be a beguiling temptation, but not one which is conducive to their best artistic efforts.

Collaborations of this sort were also very much in evidence this fall in the Next Wave Festival, the Brooklyn Academy of Music's wildly popular annual showcase of avant-garde dance, music, and drama. Not only has BAM been instrumental in reviving the collaboration genre—commissioning collaborations is part of its program—but it has also had a great hand in producing and selling the New Theatricality's third expression, dance theater. The best example of BAM's marketing wizardry in this area was its campaign for the Pina Bausch Tanztheater Wuppertal, whose tumultuously acclaimed 1984 American debut, not coincidentally, was preceded by a similar blizzard of BAM hype. I include Bausch in this discussion precisely because she is so popular here, and because she also represents the logical conclusion to what today's American avant-gardists are trying to do.

Now it may be that Pina Bausch should be considered some sort of genius. However, exactly which art her genius belongs to is difficult to determine. I believe her unconventional, imagistic pieces are more theater than dance. Disturbing and intentionally overbearing, they rely heavily on costumes, props, text, and atmospheric music, very much as certain plays do. They also are utterly dependent upon the acting ability of her gifted troupe, another theatrical hallmark. Bausch's creations marginally resemble dance insofar as the grace and impor-

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tance of everyday gestures, placed in bizarre contexts, is stylized movement; one scene melds into another, and they are blocked into strong floor patterns. But this is about all they contribute to the art of dance.

In *Arien,* which opened Bausch's fall engagement at BAM, dancing is once again the loser in the artistic mix. It loses out because, like certain plays, novels, essays, editorials, and performance art works, dance theater of this sort has an emphatic moral message to impart. Yet dance is not very good at conveying moral messages, so dance tends to disappear from the pieces made to bear them. The message in *Arien,* with which Bausch bludgeons the audience repeatedly over the course of a long evening, is that men and women are wretched to each other.

Bausch's first stroke of theatrical genius in *Arien* is to flood the BAM stage floor with several inches of water. Because of this, every footfall is expressive of everything from absurdity to loneliness to joy and serenity. Twenty-two dancers, wearing a constantly changing wardrobe of ragtag costumes and garish red makeup, splash and scream at each other, drag through the water, slavishly carry each other around on chairs, and dress each other's limp bodies in yet another costume. After a dinner party set against operatic arias degenerates into an orgy, some tenderness finally develops: the dancers become couples asleep together, molded to each others' bodies, who then laugh derisively at the BAM audience—now perceived as invading their privacy. Thus Bausch succeeds in making dance a morally instructive art, but both the dance element and the audience must pay a price for it.

We can probably expect more dance theater of this kind, even though it does little to advance the art of dancing itself. For one thing, such dance is good business. Theatrical dance is relatively easy for the uninitiated public to understand: theater is clearly more comprehensible than many forms of pure dance are. When the subject of a dance purports to deal with real life, every member of the audience can identify with it.

Theatricalized dance can also be very entertaining: the barrage of stimuli insures that no one will ever be bored. Its use of rock or other "new music," moreover, instantly confers upon dance an aura of youth and hipness. In those dances that employ visual art, choreographers can trade on the voguishness and sexiness of contemporary art, and attract its many sycophants and patrons. Collaborations tend to look great in photographs, which also contributes to their publicity appeal. But something essential to the aesthetics of dance—the look, feel, and primacy of the human body in motion—is lost in the process. Because it has abandoned pure dancing and turned for inspiration to inferior dance conventions of the past, much of today's modern dance has forfeited its claim to being the genre of movement invention.

Of course, the previous generation's pioneering formalists like Laura Dean and Lucinda Childs are still at work, creating and performing with their own companies in prestigious places—even, in Dean's case, at the 1985 BAM Next Wave Festival, where her brazenly formalist works did more to advance dancing than any of the other, more eclectic contributions. But given the speed with which today's fashionable avant-garde art changes, choreographers like Dean and Childs are no longer modern dance's hot news. Particularly in the wake of Pina Bausch's tornado-like engagement at the Festival this year, feeling is high, among modern dance audiences, critics, and choreographers, that purely formalistic dance is somewhat passé.

Taste in the world of American ballet is a very different story. When financial considerations do not force them to stage revenue-raising chestnuts like *The Nutcracker,* mainstream ballet companies evidence a deep commitment to a probing formalist aesthetic. This can be seen in the large number of formalist works by George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham currently making their way into ballet repertories around the country. But the true depth of ballet's formalist inclination is measured by the fair number

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of ballet companies which, in the Eighties, have commissioned new works from postmodernists such as Dean and Childs, and, in the process, transferred the locus of true movement invention from the world of modern dance to their own.

Indeed, formalist postmodern choreographers today are extending ballet's boundaries, much as they once did modern dance's. By bringing her famous spinning steps to the Joffrey Ballet and putting them on point, Laura Dean has given that company the best, most innovative piece in its repertory, *Night* (1980). Twyla Tharp has expanded the Joffrey and American Ballet Theatre movement vocabularies with a string of pieces that add non-traditional steps to the traditional, and wreak havoc with them both. In 1984 she started doing the same for the New York City Ballet with *Brahms/Handel.* Last winter, David Gordon brought his whimsicality to American Ballet Theatre with *Field, Chair and Mountain,* in which a ballerina danced on a chair in toe shoes. Jerome Robbins has created a new style by adapting formalist postmodernism to neoclassical ballet in his extremely successful City Ballet works, *Glass Pieces* (1983) and *Eight Lines* (1985). What increasingly is looking like the absorption of pure dance postmodernism into mainstream ballet is currently being accelerated by the National Choreography Project, a consortium consisting of no less than the NEA, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Exxon Corporation, which has funded the creation of new works by seven formalist postmodern choreographers assigned to seven American regional ballet companies.

How all these choreographers will meet the challenges of their assignments—should they use the ballet vocabulary? how much? how much of their previous movement styles should they retain?—of course remains to be seen. But because formalist postmodern choreographers have keen eyes for structure, a love of change, and a love of motion for its own sake, chances are good that they will create dances which push the entire art form ahead a few notches. This is something that can no longer be expected from much modern dance.

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Art

David Park and the figure

by Eric Gibson

In the history of what has become known as Bay Area figurative painting, the late David Park occupies a special position. In the late 1940s, when Abstract Expressionism was beginning to take hold in and around San Francisco, Park was an instructor at the California School of Fine Arts, which under the charismatic Clyfford Still was the center of this developing vortex. Suddenly Park turned his back on it all. In 1949, he destroyed his Abstract Expressionist canvases of the previous four years and determined to make a new beginning, this time in a figurative mode. The reason was his conviction that as an Abstract Expressionist he had merely been imitating a given manner and that consequently there had been little of himself in the work he had produced.

As a personal and artistic gesture, Park's destruction of his own work was radical in the extreme. He was consigning to oblivion paintings considered successful according to the critera of the moment. Clearly there was to be no turning back.

In the context of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Park's gesture has special resonance. Central to the philosophy of Abstract Expressionism was a repudiation of representational imagery and direct references to nature. Instead the artist's proper concern was believed to be the evocation, through entirely abstract means, of an emotion or cosmic outlook. Given this attitude, and the passionate partisanship it generated, especially in San Francisco under Clyfford Still's influence, it is hardly surprising that Park's *volte face* should have been regarded as a failure of nerve.

Also of major importance to Abstract Expressionism was its existential dimension. Artistic "truth" dictated that an artist should refuse to fall back on conventions and received ideas; he should approach every painting as if it were a journey into the unknown, and thereby engage in a process of self-discovery through the very act of painting. Park evidently realized that his allegiance to this credo of Abstract Expressionism was in name only, that a change of direction was the only course open to him if he was to remain true to this high ethical standard. Inevitably, Park's destruction of his paintings was a fulfillment of Abstract Expressionism's tenet of self-discovery, and the logical extension of its conception of the creative act as a leap into the unknown. What could be truer to that conception than extinguishing one's past and turning to a future not yet clearly defined?

Because of its drama, Park's act of renunciation became a celebrated part of Bay Area lore. And, as often happens in such cases, it has come to obscure our understanding of the art that followed it. What, beyond arriving at a more personal idiom, were Park's aims as a figurative painter? How did the paintings evolve and what was their final outcome? Above all, what is his importance as an artist in this period? An exhibition of Park's work this fall at the Salander-

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O'Reilly Gallery in New York (September 4 through October 26) offered viewers an opportunity to answer some of these questions for themselves.

From the very beginning Park seems to have been certain that the figure should be paramount, and certain of little more. In the variety of approaches he adopts and in the uneven quality of his work one senses that, initially anyway, Park conceived the figure as a means of pictorial salvation, the thread which would lead him out of his quandary and into a form of expression entirely his own. Indeed, it was one of the contributions of this exhibition to our understanding of the artist that we were allowed to see, alongside the better works, Park's less successful attempts to find a way around this impasse. And it is a measure of Park's abilities as a painter that we can see both the good and not-so-good and still come away recognizing his accomplishment.

Park's first figurative paintings clearly repudiate every tenet of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Not surprisingly, they shocked his colleagues at the California School of Fine Arts. He had descended from the lofty heights of abstract painting and found, virtually on his doorstep, a new kind of subject matter, frankly anecdotal and "literary." *Berkeley Jazz Band* (1951-1953), depicting a nightclub performance, shows the musicians in full cry, bending and straining to the rhythms and so caught up in what they're doing as to be oblivious to everything around them. *Ball Game on the Beach* (1953) shows an equally boisterous group tossing around a beach ball. And in *Cousin Emily and Pet* (1952) an uptown matron, all decked out in furs, is seen entering an apartment-building lobby with her dog on the end of a leash.

All these paintings stress—to an almost extreme degree—an element of anecdotalism; they concern themselves with a transient, inconsequential, or amusing event. But Park seems to resort to such extremes in order to shake himself free of his past and declare his intention of doing so unequivocally. The formal qualities of the paintings exhibit this extremism as well. With the exception of *Cousin Emily,* all are crowded, and the action in most is agitated. Our angle of vision is invariably close up; and this is given an unsettling twist by the abrupt handling of pictorial space—often one figure will loom in the foreground while others disport themselves in the far distance.

The figure in these pictures, although of central importance as part of the narrative, is not particularly developed as a formal entity. Indeed, the opposite is true: the figure is almost sketchily indicated, possessed of no volume or articulation. It is as flat and schematic as the other areas of the picture. The figure's primary function seems to be to set the scene, to be the vehicle through which the artist communicates boisterousness and conviviality. This might explain the awkwardness of the early pictures. Park's emphasis seems deliberately placed on the superficial and fleeting. Unfortunately, in an effort to put distance between his present and former selves, Park wound up with something essentially illustrational, a kind of representation that is of only passing interest.

Comparing these early pictures of 1951-1953 with those that come after, one can't help feeling that Park was aware of their shortcomings. He may have sensed that in order to hold its own in the prevailing climate of abstraction, figure painting could benefit from loosening its ties with the purely anecdotal and adopting a different relation to its subject. Following the artistic currents on the East Coast at that time, figure painting might become more serious, or ironic, or involved with mood; or it might give a greater emphasis to painterly process. Yet how was Park to attain this end and retain that sense of the immediate, of the here and now, that had emerged as the defining characteristic of his early figure painting? Although Park was not the only painter facing this problem at this time, he was the only one who approached it empirically, without resort to a style worked out in advance.

The paintings of the next four years, then —roughly from 1955 to 1958 in this exhi-

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bition—show Park taking hold of the figure, so to speak, bringing it more to the fore so he can get a clearer idea of what it is he wants it to express. Group and crowd scenes, with their simultaneous, unconnected action, disappear and are replaced by landscapes containing no more than three figures, usually only one or two. And a new motif is introduced—boating. The reason seems clear. While it permits Park to include the kind of active figure of the earlier paintings, the action itself need only be implied. A paddle raised at the proper angle, as it is in *Canoe* (1957)—which shows two figures canoeing down a stream—is enough to suggest action without resort to the kind of vigorous, distracting gesture evident in Park's earlier work. The result is a new stillness, a mood of quiet which confers upon the paintings a degree of distance from the everyday world they depict without severing the connection altogether.

Park's approach to the figure in these paintings, the way he progressively eliminated all extraneous matter in order to get at the center of an idea, suggests a sculptor chipping away at a block. Yet in their more refined form there is a new amplitude. The figures themselves are fuller, more substantial, and everything evolves out of a vigorous, painterly stroke. The illusionistic space of the earlier work, in which objects and people were discrete entities in a continuous environment, is replaced by modernist painterly space, where the figure and what surrounds it are both functions of the visible action of the brush. This of course marks a return to the kind of expressionism Park had only recently turned his back on, wherein the image emerges from the free play of the medium and the medium stands as the artist's physical and emotional signature.

At this time, Park admits light into his paintings. Thanks in part to the work of such artists as Richard Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud, Bay Area light is by now a familiar phenomenon. It is as insistent and distinctive as the light in the South of France, which of course exerted a profound effect upon the painting undertaken there as well. Yet Park seems to have been slow to work this native light into his paintings. It may be that he couldn't find a way of doing so without resorting to the illusionistic space he had recently excised, thus compromising the authority of his figure paintings. And he was right, in a way, because where light is handled in anything close to a naturalistic manner, the result is always a little too picturesque. *Boy Painting* (1957), showing a boy looking down at the worktable as he loads his brush, is powerful in its mood of interior contemplation. But the figure is illuminated by a shaft of light coming through a window, and it looks as though Park is trying to create a Rembrandtesque effect.

For Park, flatness was his surest anchor to something that could hold its own as a modern figure painting. He achieved it with brushwork, and with the close-up viewpoint —where figures appear up at the picture plane and fill most of the available surface. He also achieved it with color. Park's color was local in the sense that he used green for a tree; but the green would be keyed up or otherwise removed from nature so as to establish it simultaneously as pigment functioning abstractly, independent of the object depicted.

Color, especially this kind of free handling of it, is what finally allowed Park to reconcile his use of light with his desire for flatness. We see it first in *Rowboat,* of 1957. The focus of attention in this painting is a boy who (characteristically) fills most of the available surface area; only part of a skiff is visible behind and to the left of him. It is a bright, outdoor, beach painting in which Park has done something quite dramatic. On either side of the boy's right arm—that is, between arm and boat on one side, and arm and torso on the other—Park has painted a patch of brilliant canary yellow, which pries open a space between the boy and the boat behind him. At the same time the color evokes the character of a particular place, the quality of its light. Park was, of course, adopting Matisse's technique of

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using saturated color to construct pictorial space non-naturalistically, something Diebenkorn would later make an essential component of his own painting. In *Rowboat* and later paintings, by simultaneously opening and illuminating the painting, yet remaining visibly, palpably tied to its surface structure, Park was achieving spatial and atmospheric effects without departing from the terms of painterly painting. This achievement is central to his success as a figurative artist.

Park's painting reaches its peak in *Bather and Ocean* (1959), the latest work in the show, executed about a year before he died. The single figure is seen from the back gazing out across the ocean from atop a promontory, right hand on his hip, left one hanging by his side. The painting synthesizes Park's expressionist facture and the idea of a credible, contemporary figure capable of action set in a light-filled environment. It does this so thoroughly and well, in fact, as to stand as a minor masterpiece. The use of light here is particularly distinctive. A long patch of white down the side of one leg, and another of vermillion down the back, give the figure a sense of form and location, and inject into the dark, threatening environment a note of drama. In this sense *Bather and Ocean* resembles *Boy Painting* but with the difference that everything is unified and expressed entirely by painterly means.

Something else is present here as well: a new monumentality which removes the figure from the everyday and endows it with an almost heroic character. This effect is the culmination of Park's effort to strip away the incidental and excessively anecdotal; as such it represents an aesthetic "homecoming" of sorts. For in the painting's feeling of hieratic detachment, and in its engagement with something fundamental to human experience, it enters the same realm of the cosmic that we find in the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, especially those of Clyfford Still.

By the time of his death in 1960, Park had achieved his aim. He had evolved a personal idiom which gave credible form to the human figure and made it express the larger

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aspects of human existence. In so doing, Park came to serve as a guiding light to other artists, especially in the Bay Area, who shared his desire to turn away from Abstract Expressionism in favor of figurative painting. Park's influence, though on a smaller scale, is similar to that of de Kooning on Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, and other painters of the New York School's second generation. No one would argue that David Park was a major figure. Nevertheless, as this exhibition makes clear, he has earned a special place in the recent history of American art.

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Letters between two masters

by Leon Edel

There is something bare and autumnal in the letters between the two singular stylists and masters of the novel, Gustave Flaubert and Ivan Sergeyevitch Turgenev. They are filled with tenderness and affection, they are comradely and literary, but Flaubert's no longer have the thrust and ebullience of his celebrated correspondence and Turgenev's show signs of attrition and fatigue, although they still speak for his seductive charm. The Russian was aware of this. "We have been writing very sad letters to each other for some time now," he says, "there is illness and death in the air—it's not our fault—but we must try and shake ourselves a bit." They try. But life still has its changes and interruptions, gout, colds, and more serious symptoms—"the calling cards of death," says Turgenev.

Two hundred and thirty letters have been gathered in for *Flaubert & Turgenev: A Friendship in Letters,*[1] edited by Barbara Beaumont in a plodding academic way, and of these perhaps half a hundred can be said to be in the old high style of Flaubert's and Turgenev's earlier time. The others reflect middle age; most of them make and break appointments, express nostalgia and *amertume,* and are the equivalent of modern telephone talk. A sense of things remembered, and touches of reminiscence, give a certain vividness. Turgenev was an admirable conversationalist and a proficient linguist; the French used to say that to dine with him was to dine with all Europe. Flaubert by now had become fixed in his hermit-like habits at Croisset, where the five large windows of his study looked out on the busy traffic of the Seine. Here he nursed his household gods and his dictionaries, his musty antiquarianism, and indulged his propensity to write fiction as if he were creating encyclopedias, as James Joyce would do later in *Finnegans Wake.*

It is possible that my feelings about this correspondence, assembled for the first time more than a century after the authors' deaths, is derived from my having read the best portions of it in the biographies of the two masters—in Haumont, Yarmolinsky, Magarshack, Starkie, and Steegmuller, especially in the fresh two volumes assembled by Steegmuller in recent years out of the Plèiade *Correspondance* of Flaubert. And then, many of us come to this volume saturated with the contexts—the Goncourt journals, the reminiscences, tributes, memorials which have accumulated over the years and which give the present book a sense of repetition and familiarity. Something is lacking—there has been a process of devitalization. The prime reason for my reflections however resides in the stodginess of the translation from the French. It is heavy. It is painfully literal. One reads Gallic formulations in English sentences. The original élan, the sparkle and lightness, the sheer joy in the use of words,

1 *Flaubert & Turgenev* was published by W.W. Norton; 197 pages, $19.95.

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has disappeared. Great stylists need to be translated with style.

Whatever its shortcomings, this book is of the sort one might describe as "useful." It has brought together a scattered correspondence, put it (for better or worse) into another language; and by being chronological it is rendered "documentary"—we can trace the evolution of a friendship which began in 1863 when the writers were in their forties and see its vicissitudes during the next seventeen years, ending with the death of Flaubert in 1880. The two met when a great deal of life lay behind them; and the curve of their meetings and partings belongs to the St. Martin's summer of their history—losses, illnesses, financial troubles, *chagrin d'amour,* and the rest. They reflect best a warm and attaching love that links Spasskoye deep in Russia and Croisset perched on the Seine. Barbara Beaumont uses a well-known sentence from Turgenev for her epigraph: "We are a pair of moles burrowing away in the same direction." But this was a lighthearted utterance not to be taken too literally. They were in reality always moving in different directions. Flaubert was the mole. Turgenev would have died if he thought himself burrowing underground—or in the literary sense foraging, as Flaubert did, in the realities of language rather than life. Flaubert was a misanthrope trussed up in his mother's silver cords, even though these had tarnished with the years, and waited on by his nanny, who had come to him when he was five and who would outlive him. Turgenev belonged to the out-of-doors—he was a sportsman, an acute observer of the common folk on his vast estates, and regarded as one of the liberators of the serfs. Nature bored Flaubert. When Turgenev hears that his friend is in Switzerland he writes: "What about taking advantage of your glacier in the Rigi to create something passionate, torrid, incandescent." Flaubert did not know the meaning of incandescence. His answer was as cold as *Salammbô,* as icy as *St. Antoine* with its hopped-up orgies. Nature moved him, he said, less than art.

In her long introduction, Beaumont tries her best to level the two, pile up their similarities under a series of pedantic headings—influences, loves, women, happiness, politics, pessimism, aesthetics. To be sure they had things in common. But the fundamental biographical (and psychological) truth in the two men, whose approach to life and humans was so markedly different, resided in their past, which in some ways had partaken of the tumult of their contrasted childhoods, the revolutions of 1848, the post-Napoleonic turmoil in France, and the jolted lethargy of Russia. Beaumont's categories show a failure to understand the biographical process, and a lack of interest in the deeper lives of the two—as her skimpy bibliography reveals. To understand the meeting of Flaubert and Turgenev in the very middle of their lives requires a sense of their past. Why, for example, did Flaubert call Turgenev "a soft pear"—*une poire moelle*? And why did Turgenev cheerfully quote this soft impeachment. The phrase and its use are filled with personal history. Turgenev was soft, and he admitted it, because his mother had broken his will long ago; and he knew that now he was irresistibly under the velvet-glove tyranny of another woman—the famous gypsy prima donna, Pauline Viardot-Garcia, whom he had followed everywhere as she toured Europe.

Varvara Petrovna Turgeneva is not mentioned by Beaumont, and Flaubert's clutching and possessive mother is referred to casually in passing. And yet both lives, and doubtless their peculiar gifts, were fashioned and tempered by these women—the fierce and brutal tartaress and the adhesive Frenchwoman. Varvara Petrovna was a flogger of serfs, or she dispatched them to Siberia. She hated babies in her serf entourage, with the result that the humble mothers bore them in clandestinity or dropped them, as if they were puppies or kittens, into a convenient pond. Small wonder that Turgenev fled in the end and became a cosmopolite. The brutalities of his mother had been diluted by the tender and suffering humanity around him, and by European tutors and

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governesses. But ever after he had a need that seemed almost primordial to be near a strong woman. Pauline Viardot was strong. She had all the egotism of a pampered diva; she was accepting and unfaithful. She provided the familiar tyranny wrapped in the civilized gauze of the West, in whose shadow Turgenev could masochistically reside.

Flaubert's case was markedly different. He was the son of a prominent surgeon and grew up in a hospital where the dissecting room gave on the garden: he had a child's view of cadavers, blood and guts, bodies in all stages of dismemberment. He dwelt in a world of romantic fantasies, like his Emma Bovary: that was one way of escaping from his anchored state. Even when he fled from his mother to seek the fabled eastern Mediterranean—a boisterous brothel-hop—she had wanted to accompany him: they had parted in tears and his long letters to her describe a sincere homesickness. He was usually more the tourist than the conditioned traveller, even though he sought ancient cities and ancient histories. Turgenev was a different kind of voyager: he settled in the European countries, mastered German, French, and English, and studied national manners. Flaubert always returned to his ivory tower at Croisset. In later years he was a kind of recluse in his self-contained word-nursery. His love affair with Louise Colet, during his early twenties, gave him a sufficient look at reality to write *Madame Bovary,* but he invariably turned back to his antiquarianism and his studies of the boredom of existence. His exposure to the hospital environment melted into his readings of the Marquis de Sade. *Salammbô* contains his orgies of the mind, flagellations, rivers of blood—that side of him was a kind of case out of Krafft-Ebing.

We may speculate that this cruel inner streak in Flaubert had a sufficient resemblance to the brutalities of Varvara Petrovna to provide the kind of subliminal underground familiarity that attached Turgenev to the Frenchman: it was buried in literature and language; it was analagous to the kind

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of threads that bound the Russian to the prima donna.

And Turgenev's effect on Flaubert? It could be overwhelming. For the Russian's tenderness and delicacy—the caviar he sent him and the smoked fish, and the mandarin dressing gown that plunged him, as he said, into dreams of "absolutism and lust"—were a part of Ivan Sergeyevitch's mothering. Indeed, Flaubert was so accustomed to this kind of particular attention that he even translated his friend's casual remarks into parental admonitions and responded to them with the same mix of duty and rebellion that figured in his lifelong domestication with his mother. Turgenev had a way of issuing gentle orders. When Flaubert told him his next novel would be called *L'Éducation sentimentale,* the Russian said it was a bad title: "find another." Flaubert stuck by his choice. And when he described his idea for *Bouvard et Pécuchet,* a picture of monotony in the semi-literate lives of two dull middle-class bureaucrats, Turgenev said it was a good idea, but it needed brief and highly satirical treatment. Not at all, Flaubert answered: he wanted a full-length novel, a great encyclopedic massing of clichés (very much as Flaubert's twentieth-century disciple, Joyce, massed his parodies).

An incident, late in their lives, vividly brings home to us Flaubert's capacity to respond violently—and masochistically—to his Russian maternal surrogate. Turgenev wonders casually in one letter whether Flaubert isn't being too sedentary. He needs to walk more; and Turgenev offers a reminiscence of a quarter of a century earlier when the tsar's political police jailed him in a small stifling room. He had walked back and forth, he said, using two packs of cards to keep count: 104 cards twice a day, carried one by one for each trip. That makes 208 trips of eight paces each, 3300 paces in round figures—two kilometers! Flaubert liked such exactitudes: but perhaps he associated Turgenev's imprisonment with his own self-imprisonment at Croisset. Five minutes after reading Turgenev's letter he was out in his garden—it was a cold, bitter winter's day—taking a walk. He promptly slipped on some ice and broke his leg, making certain thus that he would do no more walking for at least two months.

We are reminded of the way in which the suggestible novelist developed acute symptoms of arsenic poisoning when he administered the suicidal powder to his heroine, Emma Bovary. And how, when his father put him into law school, he promptly developed great flashes and lightnings of rage—his so-called "epilepsy," in the diagnoses of his time (it differed markedly from Dostoevsky's *grand mal*)—and so was relieved of all study and restored to the sanctuary of his mother. Turgenev recognized that Flaubert was "an impressionable nervous man, who had been spoilt by a free and easy life." He had, said Turgenev, "tenacity but no energy."

The contrasts between the two are evident in their letters. "I have always tried to live in an ivory tower," Flaubert confesses to Turgenev, "but a sea of shit is beating up against its walls; it's enough to bring it down." (I prefer Steegmuller's translation, "a tide of shit is beating at its walls.") Turgenev's reply is Olympian. "Why should you bother yourself so much about the *rabble* as you call them? They only hold sway over those who accept their yoke." When Flaubert writes to him in Russia—"Ah! dear friend, how I should love to stretch out alongside you on your great haystacks! That would refresh my sad and singularly weary being. I am re-reading Plutarch . . ."—Turgenev's answer is filled with fresh air:

> I think a journey to Russia, the two of us together, would do you good. I've just spent four whole days, not on top of a haystack, but wandering along the paths of an old country garden, full of rustic perfumes, strawberries, birds, sunshine and sleepy shadows, with two hundred acres of gently waving rye all around! It was superb! One becomes transfixed in a kind of feeling of gravity and immensity—and stupefaction—which has to do both with physical and animal existence

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> and with God. One comes out of it as if having been immersed in some sort of restorative bath. And then one gets on with everyday living again.

Flaubert however goes on reading his Plutarch and his Apuleius and a hundred other musty tomes to charge his fantasies. He draws on entire libraries of the exotic and the baroque. Sainte-Beuve's sharp eye notices "the elements of sadistic imagination"; Edmond de Goncourt writes that Flaubert has "an intelligence haunted by de Sade." He is fixated on the *femme fatale*: she exercises a strange potency. Mario Praz, in *The Romantic Agony,* concludes that "sadism was by no means only a superficial tendency in Flaubert's temperament, but rather an inseparable part of the very nucleus of his inspiration."

This fixation on the Medusa woman—who had figured in different ways in both their lives—is pathological in Flaubert; in Turgenev it has been metamorphosed into a kind of reverence. Beaumont's section on attitudes toward love is brief and apparently unresearched. She leaps over their complicated psychosexual experiences with the declaration that "both writers remained faithful to a faded ideal of love." Their celibacy seems to prove to her that there was "marked bitterness in their view of the role and functioning of love." In Turgenev there was regret, for he could love women. But Flaubert clearly hated them. The Goncourts, reporting an evening's talk about sex, quote Turgenev as saying: "[I]t's curious, I approach a woman with emotion, a feeling of respect and surprise at my good fortune." For Flaubert sex was simply an adolescent romp; he was as compulsive about how many times a night he could jump a whore as he was about his writing.

Beaumont's annotations are parsimonious although she could have drawn on very rich sources of literary history; and the relegation of these notes to the back of the book leaves the letters marooned and without context—sends us page-turning constantly to

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find the reference. It is difficult to understand why she chose certain volumes with a seeming unawareness of how much publication there has been in recent years. I have said that she leaves out all the biographies; and she discovers in Irving Howe's long-ago study of the political novel allusions to Turgenev's lack of fulfillment in love, apparently unaware of the sensitive treatment of this subject by V. S. Pritchett. She lists Magarshack's edition of Turgenev's reminiscences without looking at the American edition, which contains a masterly preface on Turgenev by Edmund Wilson. Steegmuller is wholly ignored and it is difficult to determine what rationale of scholarship she is following in her list of "works consulted." She has wholly ignored as well perhaps the best testimony by an American who knew both Turgenev and Flaubert and had close observation of them—I refer to Henry James's beautiful memorial essay written after Turgenev's death. There are many felicitous references to the two, but the following passage will suffice:

> It is much to the honour of Flaubert, to my sense, that he appreciated Ivan Turgenev. There was a partial similarity between them. Both were large, massive men, though the Russian reached to a greater height than the Norman; both were completely honest and sincere, and both had the pessimistic element in their composition. Each had a tender regard for the other, and I think that I am neither incorrect nor indiscreet in saying that on Turgenev's part this regard had in it a strain of compassion. There was something in Gustave Flaubert that appealed to such a feeling. He had failed, on the whole, more than he had succeeded, and the great machinery of erudition—the great polishing process which he brought to bear on his productions, was not accompanied with proportionate results. He had talent without having cleverness, and imagination without having fancy. His effort was heroic, but except in the case of *Madame Bovary,* a masterpiece, he imparted something to his works (it was as if he had covered them with metallic plates) which made them sink rather than sail. He had a passion for perfection of form and for a certain splendid suggestiveness of style. He wished to produce perfect phrases, perfectly interrelated, and as closely woven together as a suit of chain-mail. He looked at life altogether as an artist, and took his work with a seriousness that never belied itself. To write an admirable page—and his idea of what constituted an admirable page was transcendent—seemed to him something to live for. He tried again and again, and he came very near it; more than once he touched it, for *Madame Bovary* surely will live. But there was something ungenerous in his genius. He was cold, and he would have given everything he had to be able to glow.

The "strain of compassion" elegantly describes those delicate threads of sensibility and psychological attachment we have looked at. And James's reference to Flaubert's lack of generosity seems to belong to his belief that genius must give of itself in abundance. Flaubert's overwrought novels and their limited number seemed to James a form of miserliness in contrast with the writings of Turgenev and his expansive temperament: and the succession of novels—*Rudin, Smoke,* the *Sportsman's Sketches, Fathers and Children, Virgin Soil, A Nest of Gentle Folk*—filled with sadness and melancholy but at the same time with the joys of life within the sadness and the beauty of humanity within its driven existence. The two novelists, their complex lives, and their unusual friendship create a vivid international drama in nineteenth-century literary history. Turgenev looms large, for he was the first of the Russians to take sustenance in the West and at the same time to help make known his fellow writers, particularly Tolstoy, with whom he had a troubled friendship that stands in sharp contrast to his relations with Flaubert.

The present collection is to be welcomed, but we may hope for a richer translation and a more generous kind of editing in the future, for the two masters challenge the biographical imagination.

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Hofmannsthal's world

Hermann Broch Hugo von Hofmannsthal and His Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920. Translated, edited, and introduced by Michael P. Steinberg. University of Chicago Press, 208 pages, $13.95

reviewed by René Wellek

Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Franz Kafka are the twentieth-century German writers who have made a deep impression in this country. But the three prominent Austrian writers of this century—Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil, and Hermann Broch—have never found a wider audience. Hofmannsthal is mainly known as the librettist of six operas by Richard Strauss: *Elektra, Der Rosenkavalier, Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Die ägyptische Helena,* and *Arabella.* His extensive work as a novelist and essayist was translated only when the Bollingen Foundation published *Selected Prose* (1952), the first of three volumes of Hofmannsthal's writing. Broch wrote its introduction.

Hermann Broch was born in 1886. He was a textile manufacturer in his youth and later established a literary reputation with his three-part novel, *The Sleepwalkers* (1931-32).[1] In 1938, after a brief imprisonment by the Gestapo, he managed to escape from Austria and reach the United States, where he was able to live for several years on grants from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations. When these grants ran out, he was offered two thousand dollars by the Bollingen Foundation, in 1947, for an introduction to the Hofmannsthal volume. Broch, in dire financial straits, accepted, although his letters from this time show a strong distaste for his topic. Broch was a great admirer of the satirist Karl Kraus and must have read Kraus's sarcastic comments on Hofmannsthal's patriotic writing during the First World War; he must have known as well of Kraus's attacks on Max Reinhardt and the Salzburg Festival, with which Hofmannsthal was associated. He might have known of Kraus's remark about Hofmannsthal: "He creates artificial flowers which wilt naturally."

At first, Broch certainly thought of Hofmannsthal as a *fin de siècle* aesthete, a type he had come to detest. But while reading Hofmannsthal in preparation for writing his introduction, Broch changed his mind. He became more and more interested in Hofmannsthal as a representative figure of his time and as a person whose ancestry and background resembled his own.

Broch's account of Hofmannsthal's forebears is, among other things, an historical evocation of the rise of the Jewish merchant class in nineteenth-century Austria. Hofmannsthal's great-grandfather, who had come from Moravia to Vienna in 1788, made a fortune, and was given a patent of nobility by Emperor Ferdinand in 1835 (not in 1825 from Emperor Franz, as Broch states). His son, the poet's grandfather, married an aristocratic girl from Milano and converted to Catholicism. Hugo's father married the daughter of a provincial lawyer.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal identified completely with the Austrian monarchy and aristocracy. In 1914, although hardly conscious of politics before, he welcomed the war enthusiastically. He could say, "The beauty of Austria never stood out more powerfully than in August 1914." During the war, he gave propaganda lectures in Sweden, wrote patriotic pamphlets on Prince Eugene of Savoy and the Empress Maria Theresia, and even wrote an article praising the Austrian military government in Poland. In 1917, he undertook to assemble essays for a volume on Austrian historical landmarks and was shocked by the refusal of prominent Czech writers he had invited to contribute. He then visited Prague and apparently for the first time realized that the destruction of Austria-Hungary was not the aim of only a few misguided Czech nationalists but the total commitment of a nation which felt the sup-

1 *The Sleepwalkers* was recently republished by North Point Press; 648 pages, $15.50.

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pression of its early independence as a grievous wrong and yearned for a state of its own that would revive the ancient kingdom of Bohemia.

The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had a traumatic effect on Hofmannsthal, but after the war he did not adjust to the new reality. Instead, he systematically helped to revive the myth of an idyllic, tolerant, supranational old Austria and to propagate Austria's role as the focus of a new pan-European union. In a much noticed lecture in Munich in 1927, Hofmannsthal preached "the conservative revolution" and "creative restoration." He supported the *Europäische Revue* of Prince Karl Anton Rohan and addressed a congress of cultural associations organized by the Prince. In his last years, Hofmannsthal's political view combined a strong German nationalism oriented toward the "folk" with extravagant claims for a supranational role for Austria. Although he died too early (July 15, 1929) to experience either the Dollfuss regime or the Nazi invasion, which put an end to all such grandiose dreams, his praise for Josef Nadler's *Literary History of German Tribes and Landscapes*—"Nobody has done more for the unification of the nation"—has an ominous ring to it if one knows of Nadler's later total conversion to National Socialism.

While preparing for the Bollingen Foundation's commission, Broch decided to write a monograph on the nineteenth century and on Austria in particular—and only then to focus on Hofmannsthal. But he had to interrupt this project when the Foundation pressed him for the introduction to *Selected Prose.* Broch wrote a literary-critical account of Hofmannsthal's prose writing; it was published in English translation in 1952, after Broch's early death in New Haven, Connecticut (on May 30, 1951). The bulk of the larger project, the monograph, appeared in 1955, in German, in a collection of Broch's essays that included a postscript by Hannah Arendt. Another chapter from the monograph, entitled "The Tower of Babel," was first printed only in 1975.

For *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and His Time,* Michael P. Steinberg has assembled all this material and translated it into English. Even the 1952 introduction appears in his new translation, which replaces that of Tania and James Stern in the Bollingen edition. Mr. Steinberg also supplies an introduction of his own which gives the publishing history of these writings and rehearses Broch's philosophy of history and art. He uses Broch's novels, *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Death of Virgil,* to state Broch's main thesis on art: that art is a form of knowledge, a total knowledge of man, society, and history. It seems strange that Mr. Steinberg, who as the translator must know his text intimately, decided to discuss the book on Hofmannsthal only in passing. I shall try to discuss it instead.

Authorized by some letters of Broch's, Mr. Steinberg subtitles this volume "The European Imagination, 1860-1920" to indicate that Broch goes back in history and discusses Europe as a whole. (The exact dates are in no way justified by the text, however.) Broch begins with a wholesale condemnation of the nineteenth century as "one of the most miserable periods of world history," basing his disapproval on its lack of a single architectural style: the rapid succession of false Baroque, false Renaissance, and false Gothic. Broch sets his condemnation of nineteenth-century architecture in a general concept of history, popular at the time, which traced the decay and disintegration of man in the modern period from the Middle Ages. This concept of decay pervaded German thought in many versions. Although Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West)* is the best known, Egon Friedell's *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit (Cultural History of Modern Times)* is closer to Broch's discussion, since Friedell did not believe that a complete catastrophe would come to Western civilization but cherished the hope of its rebirth, a return to an integrated society and a whole man.

This scheme of disintegration and re-integration goes back to antiquity: to the myth of Dionysus, who was torn to pieces by the

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Titans. This myth was central to the Orphic mysteries. It was allegorized by the neo-Platonists, such as Plotinus and Photius, and reformulated as the story of man's fragmentation and his hopes for re-integration, for a new totality. In German the theme of disintegration goes at least as far back as Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1795), where he contrasts the integrated and whole man of the Greeks with fragmented modern man. It was culture itself that inflicted this wound on modern man, Schiller argued, through the "division of the sciences and the divisions of labor." The idea of alienation is of course closely related. It comes from theology—from the writings of St. Augustine, for example—and was secularized by Hegel and Marx. The scheme is by no means exclusively German. German writers such as Lichtenberg and Jean Paul loved to quote Addison's casual saying, "The whole man must move together." In *Vala or the Four Zoas,* William Blake evoked a vision of fragmented man and splintered humanity ultimately redeemed by Eternal Man and restored to wholeness and harmony. Ruskin, who was guilty of restoring pseudo-Romanesque and Venetian Gothic, fought a long battle against the specialization and disintegration of man. T. S. Eliot, with his vision of a unified sensibility in the past—a sensibility which was then "dissociated"—fits well with Broch's idea, whatever the differences in vocabulary and emphasis.

Broch states his idea forcefully, first in general terms and then with application to Austria. He gives it a sharply anti-bourgeois point. The bourgeois combined rationalism and hedonism, which together cover the general misery of civilization with decoration. Broch sees, however, that the realistic novel of the nineteenth century aimed at totality. In terms strongly reminiscent of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel,* Broch surveys the writings of Balzac, Dickens, and Zola and then, surprisingly, recognizes another exception to his general condemnation of nineteenth-century art: the theater, where the art of acting kept alive a sense of style. Broch then describes the reaction against the failures of nineteenth-century art as a turning away from decoration. This turning away begins with Impressionism, which, according to Broch, discovered the medium as reality and returned art to the fully irrational sphere, particularly in the work of Van Gogh and Cézanne.

Broch was convinced that the world of art expresses the irrational but that it still conveys knowledge, even giving us metaphysics. "Without a grasp of reality there is no genuine art." In his own development, Broch had begun as an engineer and a student of positivistic philosophy; he then turned to fiction writing because he had arrived at the conviction that only art can convey and express the true essence of reality. *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Death of Virgil* are philosophical novels which combine poetry and philosophy. Only toward the end of his life did Broch return to straightforward speculation, to an immense project on mass psychology. In an autobiographical sketch he even disparaged his fictional writings. His judgment here seems overly harsh, even if we may come to the conclusion that his novels are, at times, an unhappy hybrid of philosophy and art.

While Broch admired Impressionism for returning art to its wellspring in man's irrational essence, he also believed that it paved the way for the *l'art pour l'art* movement of the late nineteenth century. *L'art pour l'art,* for Broch, meant an indifference to social reality and a cult of cruelty. Broch finds both in Baudelaire, who with his followers paved the way for the darkest anarchy of the twentieth century. Although *l'art pour l'art* was anti-decorative, it did not descend to the unconscious, did not create a new myth, a new totality. Broch discusses the ideal of totality in Melville and Tolstoy, claiming that the Russian novel broke through the limits of *l'art pour l'art* and opened the door to a new ethical work of art; nevertheless, he argues, it did not itself create a new myth. Even Joyce ultimately failed, according to Broch, although Broch had earlier hailed Joyce as the representative of a new age, as the creator of a new novel of simultaneity, of

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an epic totality. This section of the book, on general European culture, ends with only a vague hope for a reconciliation of art and ethics in a new myth.

In the second section of the book Broch narrows his focus to Germany, Austria, and Vienna. The reflections on the vacuum of German art become more concrete. Wagner, characterized as an "unmusical genius of music and an unpoetic genius of poetry," and Nietzsche are both made responsible for the shameful events of the Nazi period, even though they might have disavowed them. Vienna of the early twentieth century is described as a town of museums, alive only in the theater. Broch draws a picture of the Emperor Franz Josef as a totally isolated man who lived in solitude while the aristocracy engaged in the pursuit of fugitive pleasures—all the while expecting catastrophe. The bourgeoisie, aping the upper classes, was no better. In Broch's view Vienna was the capital of *Kitsch* and *Gemütlichkeit*; to him this implies a wisdom that senses demise and accepts it. "Nevertheless," Broch writes, "it was operetta wisdom, and under the shadow of the approaching demise it became spectral [*geisterhaft*, that is, "spookish," not "spirited," as the translation has it] and developed into Vienna's gay apocalypse." Broch's picture here seems grossly overdrawn. Even the Emperor, old and struck by the tragedies of his family, was not that isolated. He had his friendship with Katharina Schratt and was a jovial companion of officers, hunters, and stableboys during his long months in his villa at Ischl. The ordinary Vienna burgher rarely had premonitions of the end until the later stages of the War.

Finally we arrive at Hofmannsthal. We are told the story of his ancestry, his assimilation into the Catholic aristocracy, and his religious crisis (which possibly made him contemplate entering the Franciscan order). Hofmannsthal was a prodigy. Even in the Gymnasium he published poetry and was an instant success. Broch recognizes that the youthful Hofmannsthal was not an aesthete but an artist who was searching for an ethical center. It is true that he lived in a dream world, but even the earliest poems and plays circled around the theme of life and death; their deliberate impersonality was only an attempt by Hofmannsthal to hide his struggle for self-transcendence. Broch contrasts Hofmannsthal with Stefan George and Rilke, who thought of themselves as priests of a religion of art. Hofmannsthal, in contrast, found an objective style in his work for the theater. Broch sees this turn as the result of what he calls "the second assimilation." Hofmannsthal identified with both the Austrian aristocracy and with the people, the folk (a fairy-tale entity, in Broch's view). Hofmannsthal searched for an individual style but found it only in his last drama, *The Tower*. Here Broch comments for the first time on Hofmannsthal's "only too well-known" fictional letter, written under the name of "Lord Chandos," which expresses despair about language. This despair led him to appeal to the magic of music, according to Broch. Broch is upset by his collaboration with Richard Strauss; he suspects the proximity of Wagner and sees Hofmannsthal's turn to the theater as a surrender to the "vacuum of values." Thus Hofmannsthal became, for Broch, a symbol of a disappearing Austria, of its disappearing aristocracy and disappearing theater—"a symbol in the vacuum, not of the vacuum." Here the original manuscript of *Hofmannsthal and His Time* breaks off.

It was at this point that Broch composed the introduction to *Selected Prose*. Here he again expounds Hofmannsthal's impersonality concept, his desire to suppress the ego, his anti-expressionism. "Confession is nothing, knowledge is everything," Hofmannsthal writes; that is, knowledge means a complete identification with the object. Broch quotes the Sanscrit "tat van asi"—"I am you"—which he, like Hofmannsthal, learned from Schopenhauer. But this idea implies mysticism, ecstasy, the inability of the artist to ever identify with his object, confined as he is to the enmity and incomprehensibility of things. Hofmannsthal made a compromise between these views. He pro-

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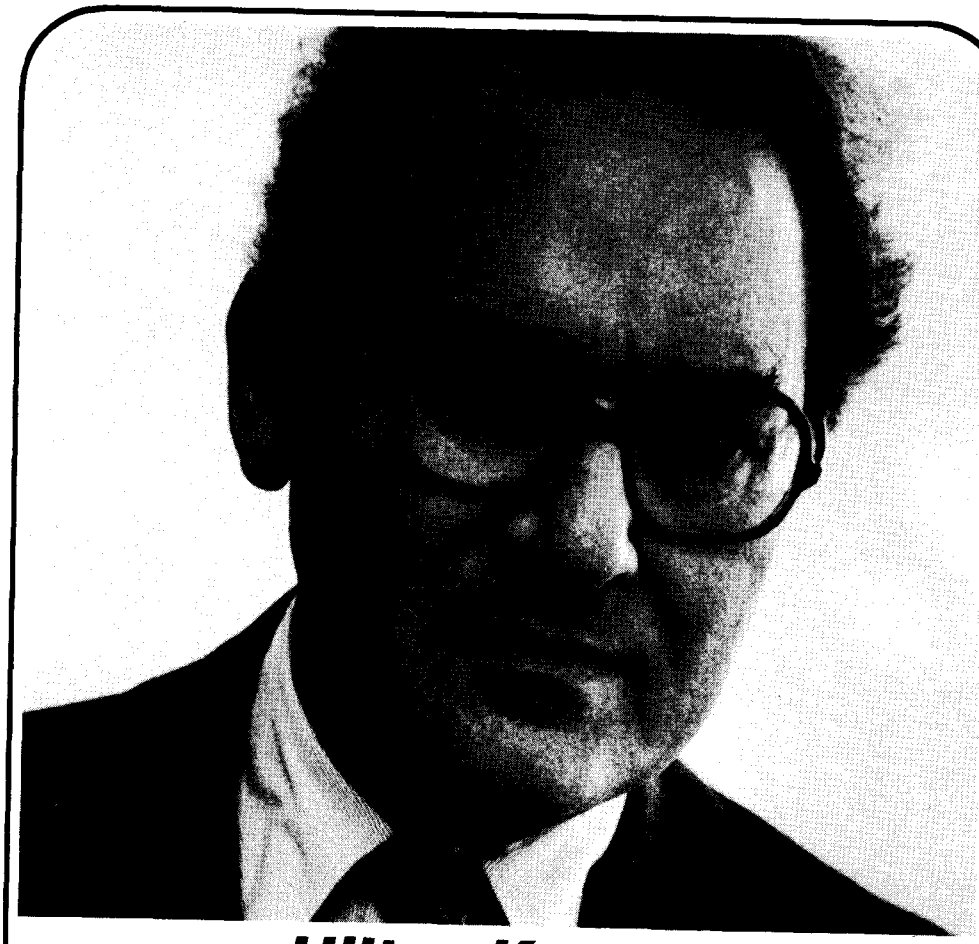

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nounced an injunction against lyric poetry but felt that poetry could flourish on the stage and in narrative.

Broch characterizes Hofmannsthal's extremely varied narrative prose in general terms—as visual, as an enchantment with landscape. The alps, the plains of the Po, Venice, the motifs of travel and water dominate in it, while Hofmannsthal's protagonists remain childlike in a fairy-tale atmosphere. Speaking in the tradition of German aesthetics, Broch sees in allegory a dangerous process of petrification. But Hofmannsthal, according to Broch, broke through to beautiful simplicity with *The Woman Without a Shadow,* a fairy tale which Broch rightly considers one of Hofmannsthal's most successful works. Still, Hofmannsthal felt obliged to return to the theme of childhood in *The Tower.* Broch alludes to this play several times admiringly, but finds no occasion to discuss it in detail. He turns rather to Hofmannsthal's essayistic work, praising particularly the travel sketches, *The Moments of Greece,* where Hofmannsthal, who disapproved of confessional poetry, came closest to speaking of himself.

Broch says almost nothing of Hofmannsthal's literary criticism. *Selected Prose* includes translations of an essay on Balzac and the speech "On Shakespeare's Kings and Noblemen" (1902), in which Hofmannsthal argues that Shakespeare's work is noble and aristocratic, even when he depicts figures from the people. His heroes have dignity, have a "courtesy of the heart" which Hofmannsthal demonstrates by reference to the scene in *Julius Caesar* where Brutus withdraws the lute from under the sleeping youth Lucius. This and a few other articles are, however, exceptions. The bulk of Hofmannsthal's literary criticism is "appreciation," what used to be called "impressionistic" criticism but should rather be called "metaphorical," since Hofmannsthal often indulged in those little fanciful digressions which Karl Kraus labeled "embroideries," totally unrelated to the text under discussion. Thus an essay on Balzac concludes: "Wondrous stream, to which the soul surrenders with closed eyes, on which it drifts, like an enchanted boat, over waters which are of the color of blood or even gray like stone, or like the color of rosy mussels, from the depth of the abyss hidden beneath it." This sort of writing seems to have pleased the taste of the time but dates Hofmannsthal's literary criticism badly. It lacks skill in analysis and even characterization. It remains the least satisfying side of his many-sided work.

Broch's chapter entitled "The Tower of Babel" looks like another attempt to rewrite the Hofmannsthal monograph. It is obviously later than the chapters printed first in 1955. It expounds the very same argument in somewhat different terms. We hear first of the *fin de siècle* style as a form of rococo. Broch alludes to the fashion for Japanese art and to the Vienna *Sezession.* He also discusses, again, French Impressionism, which he says produced two trends in the other arts. Impressionism in music appeals by its brightness in contrast to the gloom of Wagner's music. Symbolism in literature is the fairy-tale of the period. In Maeterlinck it approaches pantomime and leads to the dancing of Isadora Duncan. According to Broch, Vienna did not care for symbolism, either in dance or painting.

On all these issues Hofmannsthal was a typical Viennese. He was touched by the new trends—Impressionism and symbolism—but remained a traditionalist who wanted to do things better. For Broch, *Der Rosenkavalier* is a comedy ennobling the style of Da Ponte, the librettist of *Don Giovanni, Le Nozze di Figaro,* and *Così fan tutte.* About the time of *Rosenkavalier* many new trends were evident in the arts. Arnold Schönberg and his pupil Alban Berg were renovating Viennese music. There was Futurism in painting, which seems to Broch inferior. Cubism, he admits, was a real technical novelty, but its effect on literature seems to Broch minimal. The great novelists of the time—Thomas Mann, Henry James, Marcel Proust—were solidly upper class and bourgeois, since language puts a constraint on the artist. Only Joyce broke the yoke. Joyce's *Ulysses* and

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Finnegans Wake are described as the *summa* of all ages. But then Broch says that they reduce man to his most primitive universal traits. "His two-leggedness is left, all knowledge useless, useless everything that man knows about himself." Surprisingly (Broch's conversion to Hofmannsthal's greatness must have been then complete) Broch now states that Hofmannsthal exceeds Proust in poetic, though not in psychological, wealth and that in Hofmannsthal's compassion for humanity he is more poetic than Joyce, who did not know compassion.

Broch's section on "ethical art" ranges widely over social art from Ibsen to Hauptmann and Gorky and again discusses the relation between art and ethics (Broch avoids the term "morality"). He holds fast to the view that art must remain autonomous but again rejects the inflated claims of Nietzsche and Stefan George, saying that they lead to dehumanization. Hofmannsthal's *Everyman,* a rewriting of the English mystery play, was a call for a return to Christianity. But it and the *Great World Theater* were transformed by Max Reinhardt into almost blasphemous spectacles for the philistine rabble. Broch sees hope in the ethical art of satire, alluding to Karl Kraus. He still believed that the development of art (not its non-existent progress) serves ethical progress and that it could ultimately avert the world catastrophe. He trusts the conjunction between the naturalism of satire and the anti-naturalism of avant-garde painting—their common faith in the ethical and hence in the divinity of man. Hofmannsthal is forgotten. He would not fit on either side.

Obviously, *Hofmannsthal and His Time* is a bewildering panorama. In spite of some final expressions of hope, it paints a picture of unrelieved gloom, of the disintegration of man, the decadence of art, the end of the great tradition. Broch understandably felt the end of the world of his youth acutely. He believed in the *Zeitgeist,* the integrity of every period, and judged it from a lofty ethical and artistic point of view. The condemnation of the nineteenth century and of Vienna of the *fin de siècle* seems to me too sweeping. The phrase "gay apocalypse" ignores the continuity of life of the masses, who were hardly affected by the frivolity of the upper crust and who were aware of the impending disaster only when the outbreak of the war brought it home to everybody. The accomplishments of the time in the arts keep their enduring value whatever the objections to individual figures and works may be. It may be an excessively sober and commonsense conclusion to say that one should avoid two extremes. One must avoid the sentimental glorification of Old Vienna and old Austria-Hungary nurtured by a century-and-a-half-old propaganda, which ignores the sins of the monarchy and the German ruling classes against what they called "nationalities." However great the accomplishments, quite unrelated, of writers living in Vienna —Freud and Wittgenstein (both neglected by Broch), Hofmannsthal, Musil, Broch, Karl Kraus, and others—other centers of the time could compete very well: Paris, Petersburg, and London certainly. On the other hand, one must also avoid embracing Broch's view of a complete "vacuum of values" which can be defended only by a philosophy of history which prophesies decay and doom.

Marxism and criticism

Terry Eagleton The Function of Criticism: From *The Spectator* to Post-Structuralism. Verso Editions, 133 pages, $20

reviewed by Peter Shaw

For the Marxist—whether in the days of the nineteenth-century theorist Plekhanov, or of Lenin, Trotsky, or Zhdanov, Stalin's murderous commissar—the function of criticism, as of literature, has been to promote the cause of political revolution. When this less than purely literary aim has periodically come to light in the past, it has tended to cause a certain amount of dismay among

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those to whom Marxism represents an intellectual system like any other. In our own time, though, dismay has been replaced with complacency. It is now possible for an avowed Marxist literary critic—the British academic, Terry Eagleton—to assign a primarily political function to literature without causing so much as a raised eyebrow.

Eagleton's impunity reflects the special status that Marxism has achieved in the academy. Regarded as something entirely apart from Communism, Marxism stands, virtually by definition, above political suspicion. Yet at the same time it is accorded a prestigious position in the vanguard of literary theory by virtue of its revolutionary political associations. This paradox has been a fruitful one for a dedicated ideologue like Terry Eagleton. Thus his current book, *The Function of Criticism,* both benefits from the comfortable integration of Marxism into current literary theory and exerts some of the special authority that permits Marxists to determine the direction most likely to be taken by literary discussion in the near future.

With his title, which echoes Matthew Arnold's essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Eagleton boldly telegraphs his intention to reverse the literary ideal of elevating criticism above partisanship. As Arnold stated it, the function of criticism is "to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind." For Eagleton, criticism should be subject above all to practice and politics. As he puts it in his final sentence,

> Modern criticism was born of the struggle against the absolutist state; unless its future is now defined as a struggle against the bourgeois state, it might have no future at all.

The struggle to which Eagleton refers never quite emerges with clarity from the account of English criticism that fills most of this short book. He starts with the essayists of the eighteenth century—Addison, Steele, and Johnson—whom he credits with having created a free and enlightened climate of discourse, or "public sphere," presumably in opposition to the political absolutism of the period. Here as elsewhere Eagleton virtually replicates the Marxist theories of Jürgen Habermas. Transposing Habermas's account of the decline of German criticism from the eighteenth century onward, Eagleton pronounces the spirited, open atmosphere of the public sphere to have been poisoned by the injection of narrow, commercially tainted attitudes, all of them deriving from the British economic system as it evolved into "late capitalism."

In Germany, Habermas eventually came under attack from younger Marxists, one of whom branded him a "late bourgeois" for idealizing the public sphere, which was after all a middle-class creation. Eagleton, who seems determined to avoid a similar charge, tempers his praise with belittlement. Thus, whereas at one point the public sphere is an admirable "emancipation movement" of the middle class, at another point it is exposed as a means to "unify the English ruling bloc." Having thus passed through the danger of betraying any bourgeois leanings, Eagleton continues his transposition of Habermas's decline of criticism. By the early nineteenth century, "the bourgeois public sphere is fissured and warped . . . divided as it is over how much political repression of the working class is tolerable without the risk of insurrection." Repeatedly through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the "logic of commodity production" is said to have destroyed the public sphere, which seems to keep reconstituting itself much in the manner of an animated cartoon figure who is demolished in one frame only to reappear whole and hearty in the next.

Eagleton's cartoon-like analysis continues into the Victorian period. Here Matthew Arnold's efforts to educate working people are interpreted as attempts to "incorporate an unruly proletariat"—an impulse that, remarkably enough, is "inseparable from the will to break and integrate" the working classes. Finally, in the twentieth century, F. R. Leavis's attempt to develop a mature, socially and morally committed literary crit-

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icism is dismissed as an "illusion" in light of the ever malign influences of "a political society ridden with class-conflict" and "a culture dominated by the commodity." And so it goes. Neither real life nor the intentions and opinions of actual literary critics interfere with Eagleton's demonologizing. Society is projected as a miasma of sinister forces, or rather of the single force of capitalism under different guises, the most terrible of which is a "late monopoly capitalism which colonizes the very realm of subjectivity itself." Reality may sometimes appear to break in on this analysis, as when Eagleton quotes Defoe's description of London coffeehouses and restaurants where "you meet with a *Tinker,* a *Cobbler,* or a *Porter,* Criticizing upon the Speeches of Majesty, or the writings of the most celebrated Men of the Age." But since Eagleton cannot allow the eighteenth century too much equality, he deals with Defoe's testimony by dismissal, assuring himself and his reader, without evidence, that the patrons of such places did *not* extend "beyond parsons and surgeons to farm labourers or domestic servants."

In his run through the history of criticism, Eagleton's nominal interest in society brings him to the significant question of the relationship between the critic and his audience. He notes that when a critic attempts to address his fellow citizens in the manner of the eighteenth-century essayists—as an amateur whose perceptions are assumed to be very much like their own—he runs the risk of sacrificing authority. On the other hand, if he adopts a professional mode he renders himself marginal. The critic's dilemma in choosing a voice lurks as the real subject of *The Function of Criticism.* Eagleton is able to see quite clearly how this dilemma has influenced styles of discourse from Addison to Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, and Leavis. But he is ultimately chained to his *parti pris,* which demands the reduction of every problem to Marxist terms, the critic's human predicament no less than any other.

The two poles of Eagleton's concern—the authenticity of the critic and the needs of society—would both seem to be served best by the free play of ideas that was Matthew Arnold's ideal. But Eagleton's aims are chiefly institutional. He proposes first of all to bolster the position of Marxist criticism through an entente with radical feminist literary criticism. Here, one notes, in contrast to all his Marxian insouciance toward bourgeois orthodoxies, Eagleton shows careful deference to the prescribed usages of feminism, employing the forms "spokesperson" and "him or her." (He does not seem to be aware of the more sensitive usage of his fellow Marxist, Michael Ryan: "her or him.")

Besides benefiting from the strong position of feminism in the academy, Eagleton hopes to participate in a return to the criticism of popular culture as it was developed in the 1930s and 1940s by the Marxists of the Frankfurt School (who used the term "mass culture"). Near the end of *The Function of Criticism,* Eagleton pronounces without prior warning that the public sphere's latest "fall under the dominance of the commodity" has come because of the mass media. Hurriedly concluding his entire argument on this note, he announces:

> The role of the contemporary critic is to resist that dominance by re-connecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests and desires may assume the cultural forms which could weld them into a collective political force.

This, then, is the promised war against the absolutist state. Eagleton's phrasing of the critic's role may be offered as an additional reason for the current respectability of Marxist criticism: its politically revolutionary aims—rarely stated, and then but glancingly—remain for the most part too obscure to be fully comprehended by innocent academics.

But the function of Marxist criticism such as Eagleton's is not so much to bring about immediate revolutionary ends as it is to gain

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intellectual respectability for radical political causes. The appeal is primarily to liberal academics. They can be counted on to feel closer to a critic like Eagleton—thanks to the currently sanctioned obscurities of his style—than to any critics closer to their own political values, most of whom still attempt to express themselves perspicuously. As for the ideal of critical disinterestedness once enunciated by Matthew Arnold, it is precisely to the degree that Eagleton can violate this aspiration with impunity that he demonstrates the current triumph of Marxist criticism. This has been to create a climate of discourse in which most academics concerned with literary theory can be counted on to treat any appeal to high, Arnoldian literary values as a quaint anachronism.

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Letters

Lawrence Stone and Marxism

To the Editors:
In the June issue of *The New Criterion,* Norman Cantor asserts that "[Lawrence] Stone was—and is—an English Marxist." He goes on to imply that Lawrence Stone used his "extensive patronage powers" as director of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center at Princeton University to promote Marxism.

I find those statements distressing. I have known Lawrence Stone for seventeen years and consider him an old-fashioned liberal. Although he is a great admirer of Tawney's, he is not and never was a Marxist. He is indeed director of the Davis Center, but he does not rule over it with absolute or even partial sovereignty. A committee, of which I have twice been a member, makes every decision on the election of fellows and the selection of seminar topics. The history department approves those decisions and passes on the Center's budget. And aside from its mode of operation, the Center has never favored Marxism or any of the other ideologies that Cantor names.

His way of calling names strikes me less as a defense of liberalism than as a revival of McCarthyism. It discredits him and the liberalism he purports to defend. I think he should make a public apology.

Robert Darnton
Department of History
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey

Norman Cantor replies:
I did say that Stone was and is an English Marxist and I do not retract this statement. On the contrary, I confirm it.

Stone's first publication, in 1948, was an article in support of a thesis propounded in 1940 by the famous Marxist historian, R. H. Tawney. This thesis attributed the cause of the English Civil War of the 1640s to class conflict, to the "rise of the [bourgeois] gentry." Stone explicitly supported Tawney's Marxist model: "Confronted with the rise of the gentry, merchants, and lawyers, a new class whose political aspirations and whose views on foreign policy differed fundamentally from those of the aristocracy, the hold of the latter upon the springs of political power were bound to be loosened." Lest it be thought that this was a juvenile work that Stone later repudiated, we find him even in 1985 still insisting the Tawney class-conflict rise of the gentry thesis "to be largely true." One of the amazing things about Stone's career as a historian has been the remarkable consistency of his devotion to Tawney, the leading English Marxist scholar of the first half of the twentieth century. In 1965 Stone published a very long volume on the crisis of the English aristocracy in the seventeenth century. Here the Marxist model, tricked out with various social and cultural aspects, was repeated, except that the emphasis was *now* on the aristocracy falling to make way for the gentry. In a book I published in 1968—*The English: A History of Politics and Society to 1760*—I pointed out that this was essentially a variant of the same tired Marxist Tawney model of the origins of the English Civil War.

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Stone makes his Marxist theory of history explicit early on in his book on the aristocracy. The historical infrastructure—"this bed-rock of history," he calls it—is in characteristic Marxist fashion "changing means of production, changing economic relationships between one class and another, changing distribution of the national income." Following Adorno, Gramsci, and the proponents of neo-Marxist critical theory of the 1930s, Stone goes on to tell us that the political and cultural superstructure is "equally significant." But "God help the historian," he warns, who fails to pay sufficient attention to the basic material and class infrastructure.

Stone's 1977 opus—another very large book—was a history of the family in England from 1500 to 1800. In the family book and other recent work Stone is somewhat less dialectically Marxist than in his earlier publications. Like many Marxists in Britain and this country, he has sought to bask in the glowing reputation of Fernand Braudel and the French structuralist historians. Braudel's structuralist history—uneasily balancing contradictory synchronic and diachronic views of the world—is a kind of Marxism with the Hegelian dialectic severely muted. Yet in Stone's book on the English family, as in Braudel's history of capitalism, the essential Marxist historiographical assumptions remain: the longitudinal study of institutional and status development shaped by class interests. This is the updated Marxism that Stone now peddles, while denying the Marxist label. It is not Leninism. But as far as academic history is concerned, it is a more subtle and poisonous Marxism than traditional Leninism. In peddling this Braudelian snake oil, Stone has been assisted by the social historian Natalie Zemon Davis, whom he personally recruited to join the Princeton department.

What exactly are the dogmas of this neo-Marxism that Stone advocates? They are readily apparent from his writings in the late Seventies and early Eighties.

1. There is a rejection of the narrative focus of traditional liberal historiography in favor of "an analytical, not a narrative arrangement . . . . The historian is obliged to adopt an analytical organization of the material." By analytical organization, Stone means the divestment of humanistic concerns from historical writing, the obliteration of the liberal historian's concern about what individual people actually did in real-time situations in the past, and the replacement of liberal historiography with abstracted and mechanistic structures. This attitude originated with Marx and Engels and is essential to neo-Marxist historiography.

2. The "first" concern for the historian, Stone claims, is "the material basis of human existence, the limitations imposed by demography, human geography and ecology (a particular interest of the French)." Indeed, this reductionist materialism is precisely the manner in which Braudel, in the Fifties and Sixties, established his alliance with the then-dominant Marxism at the University of Paris and legitimated a soft-core (but very present) neo-Marxist orthodoxy in French historiography. Stone goes down this neo-Marxist line all the way.

3. Stone expresses his contempt for those traditional liberal-conservative historians who have "concentrated most of their attention on kings and presidents, nobles and bishops, generals and politicians" (i.e., those who have had the audacity to write about what actually happened in history). Instead, he admires a group of recent leftist writers who have focused their attention on "the inarticulate masses." This is the pure Marxist line in historiography. The masses are morally good and important, the leaders of government and society are bad and unimportant. And since the masses are inarticulate, the Marxist historian's imagination is not limited by inconvenient factual material when he attributes extravagant virtue to them.

4. At the head of the list of Stone's favorite historians—he tells us—are the American Eugene Genovese and the Englishmen E. P. Thompson and E. J. Hobsbawm. These are well-known Marxist scholars: they might not even be designated soft-core, but may be more of the conventional Marxist variety. Indeed, Stone himself says, while praising Thompson vehemently, that "Mr. Thompson's position seems to be a consistently neo-Marxist one."

These quotations are all from a book published by Stone in 1981. Perhaps Professor Darnton has not read this book. As recently as 1977 we also find Stone quoting with strong approval Marx

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himself on the Industrial Revolution. In 1984, Stone's Marxist orientation sharply persisted. In trying to answer the question what made England different from Continental Europe in the eighteenth century, Stone provides—as would any Marxist scholar—explanations drawn exclusively from class and social group behavior and status. He totally ignores the first explanation that would be given by a liberal or conservative historian—the difference in legal and constitutional principles and institutions, the primacy in England of common-law due process and parliamentary traditions as against Roman law and absolutist traditions on the Continent. Obviously, these liberal traditions mean nothing to Stone. After all, of what account are English law and constitutionalism, upon which the American Constitution is based, compared with the glories of the "inarticulate masses"?

May I suggest a reason why Darnton and Stone (I received a letter from Stone virtually identical to Darnton's letter to *The New Criterion*) are so excited? The Princeton department is currently under a thick cloud.

Two years ago the department voted to give tenure to David Abraham, a young Marxist historian of the Weimar Republic accused of manufacturing evidence to demonstrate—in accordance with the Marxist model—the close association between German big business and the rising Hitler. Fortunately, Henry Turner at Yale and Gerald Feldman at Berkeley charged Abraham in time for the Princeton administration to veto Abraham's tenure, to the shock and embarrassment of the Princeton History Department. At last December's meeting of the American Historical Association, a member of the Princeton department was buttonholing *AHA* members on Abraham's behalf, probably commissioned by his mentor Stone to do so. A scholar in West Germany has checked a representative sample of Abraham's footnotes and concluded that the great majority are rife with error. Yet Stone and his associate Natalie Zemon Davis have both publicly avowed their support for Abraham. These arrogant people have no sense of shame.

Naturally, Darnton and Stone are frightened by my reference to Stone as a Marxist because, added to the Abraham scandal, this information, if widely disseminated, could harm the Princeton history department's high prestige and its capacity to garner grants and recruit and place graduate students. All the more should the truth be known, that the Princeton history department, the best in the country in the 1950s, and then deeply committed to liberal traditions, has become in the Stone era a central school for indoctrination of the young in Marxist ideology as applied to historical scholarship. It is perhaps better that Marxism find its historiographical focus in the cultured Ivy League than in some dreadful, mean state college. But Stone and Darnton want to have it both ways—to be Ivy League haute bourgeoisie using their positions of affluence and power to promote leftist ideology while denying their leftist orientation. They want to drive to the barricades in their Ferraris.

It is principally Stone's brand of "social history" that the resources of the Shelby Collum Davis Center have been used to promote. As an expert on the history of patronage, Stone is assuredly aware of the subtle ways in which patronage can be exercised. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that—it is done all the time in the academic world. What is unfortunate in this instance is that, though Shelby Collum Davis's political views are far to the right of Marxism, the proceeds of his generous gift to his alma mater are being used to sustain an ideology that is the polar opposite of Mr. Davis's own attitude.

What has happened to the Princeton history department is not unique on the American academic scene. The history department at New York University has similarly been taken over by the Marxists and their radical feminist allies. At Harvard, the art history department has fallen prey to T. J. Clarke, another English Marxist, and Marxists have assumed positions of power and influence in the law school. At SUNY-Binghamton, a major institute sympathetic to Marxism flourishes, supported by the long-suffering taxpayers of New York state. At Columbia, an apologist for the PLO holds the senior chair in the humanities. Marxism is fashionable these days. It is well known that the Yale English department is the center for structuralism and deconstruction—the ideological cognates of contemporary Marxism—in literary criticism. In many other major academic departments, the forces

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arrayed against humanism are triumphant, often abetted—as at Rice and Duke—by timid or cynical university administrators. The peculiar thing about the Princeton situation is not the Marxist triumph in the history department, but that Stone and his associates persist in denying what they are. They continue to claim that night is day, and red is white.

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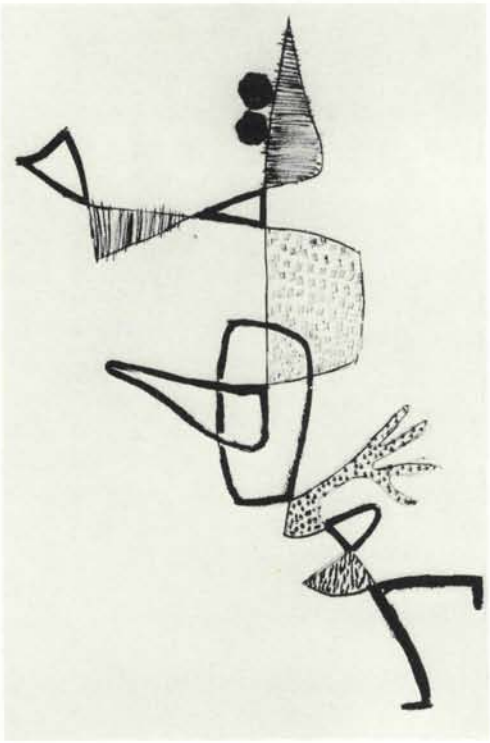

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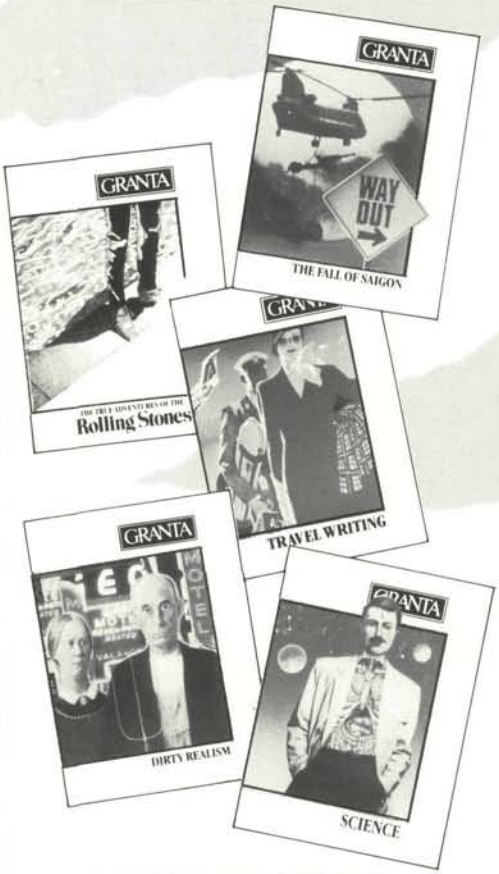

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